the New Town travel guides

ALAMAR

INTI - International New Town Institute
Chapter I: 
Tracing the roots of Alamar

Alamar is one of those new towns which look remarkably familiar at first glance. An abundance of standardized walk-up flats, modernist social housing of 5-6 storeys of a similar kind that Western European New Towns excelled in during the 50s and 60s. Organized in neighborhood units, each with their set of shops, schools and services. A lot of open, green spaces in between and ample provision for cars and traffic. But no matter how familiar this cityscape looks: this is Cuba and everything is different from what it looks like. To start with: this new town was not built in the 50s but in the 70s, in a quite extraordinary way, completely different than its European family members. Even if they share the same DNA, Alamar is not only shaped by the modernist canon of postwar new towns, but just as much by the revolutionary ethos of Cuba after the triumph of the revolution in 1959 and it even bears the marks of the prerevolutionary period under the regime of President Fulgencio Batista. At second glance, this peculiar mix makes up the unique character of Alamar, new town 'at the sea'.

Havana derives its popularity as a tourist destination for a large part from the fact that the city remains practically unchanged from what it looked like 60 years ago. The old inner city, Habana Vieja, shows the same colonial structure and beautiful buildings, albeit ever more crumbling, than it did in 1959. Vedado, the urban extension dating back from the 1850s still showcases the impressive art deco architecture gems and the modernist masterpieces from the fifties in an original state that is unique in the world. But even though the formal appearance of the city is basically unchanged, the use and atmosphere of these urban areas is nothing like it used to be.

Sodom and Gomorra
In the fifties, Havana was an international, hustling and bustling metropolis of the kind that Latin American capitals usually were: with a million inhabitants, it was by far the biggest city on the mainly agricultural island, followed by cities like Santiago and Cienfuegos, which only had around 100,000 residents. Check. All energy and investment was concentrated on Havana, which was quickly turning into a city of pleasure and entertainment, dominated by American culture. On the one hand this became visible in the shopping streets and well-designed department stores that boasted the latest fashions and trends; 900 nightclubs that offered spectacular shows, famous all over the world like the Cabaret Tropicana; casino’s where every kind of gambling was possible and encouraged like Casino Nacional and Montmartre Club; international hotels like the Habana Riviera and the Hilton hotel, that catered for the rich and famous; and a building frenzy that produced modernist villa’s in such a great number and of such luxury as seen nowhere else, with the possible exception of Los Angeles.

On the other hand, this festive city was looked at by many as Cuba’s own Sodom and Gomorra. Many of the nightclubs and hotels, frequented by the American showbiz stars like Ava Gardner, Frank Sinatra, Lana Turner and Robert Mitchum, were in the hands of the American mafia, as was pictured in movies like The Godfather, Havana and The lost city. American mafia figureheads like Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano eagerly developed real estate and entertainment projects to turn Havana into a Latin Las Vegas. There were hundreds of brothels and more than 10,000 prostitutes working the streets. Without the nuisance and the risk of permanent investigations and US government control, Havana offered an excellent playground for American organized crime, especially since President Fulgencio Batista actively promoted the development of Havana as entertainment capital. He stimulated the building of casino’s and hotels with tax incentives and protected the mobsters; Meyer Lansky was a close friend. If he sincerely thought entertainment and tourism were the way forward for to develop Havana, is...
unknown. It is known however, that he carried with him more than 300 million dollars from graft and pay-offs, when he fled the country on new year’s eve 1958/9.3

Parallel to the mundane and hedonistic development of Havana in the 40s and 50s, also inequality and segregation grew. The city was exiting but unfair. All the characteristics of an unequal city, that were common in most Latin American cities in that era, also existed in Havana: extensive areas of the city consisted of slums, poverty was appalling, illiteracy was high, and racial segregation was normal. The entertainment world included and attracted gambling, prostitution, crime, and widespread corruption. Up to the highest regions of government an unimaginable corruption pervaded.

Unofficially Havana was becoming a semi-American city and Cuba was seen as one of the states of the USA, a status that was comparable to that of Puerto Rico or Hawaii. It is not difficult to understand how this development was an affront to all those parties that had been fighting –literally- for the independence of Cuba from colonial rule since the 19th century, starting with Jose Marti, the godfather of the Cuban revolution who organized and inspired the first insurgence in 1895.

**Two American plans**

The influx of American money and culture had a huge and stimulating effect on modern architecture, which in the 40s and 50s went through “a period of greatest formal and conceptual excellence.”4 The architectural scene was very active, with a high pace of innovation and experiment, and designers like Mario Romanach, Frank Martínez, Eugenio Batista, Nicolas Quintana and Nicolas Arroyo. The exchange with colleagues abroad was lively and intensive and Havana hosted visitors like Mies van der Rohe, Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius and Philip Johnson; magazines were published and Associations, Clubs and Groups were founded. This period saw economic recovery and real estate development was actively promoted by the government, notably with the 1952 Condominium Law, which made it possible to profitably develop towers higher than six storeys along the Malecon. The well-known FOCSA apartment building in Vedado (1956) s an example of this, changing the skyline of Havana in a striking way.5

The modernist style, influenced by the loose forms of contemporary Brazilian architecture, American suburban culture but also many more influences, went through an incredible fertile period with a whole new generation of architects taking advantage of all the creative possibilities of the economic boom. This resulted in a strong connection between the modernist architectural style and the period of Americanization: modernism played a very visible role in shaping this Havana of abundance.

But not only the actual buildings that we can still see today as the legacy of the Batista period bear witness to a period of great and controversial transformation. Two unexecuted plans that were well underway when the triumph of the revolution happened, would have forever changed the face of the city as well as its atmosphere and program. The architects of these two plans, that share a rather megalomaniac approach, were not Cuban, but American, and both were figureheads of the Modern Movement.

José Luis Sert’s proposals for Havana’s inner city (1955-1958) are surprising even today: were they even serious? Just as rigorous as Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin thirty years earlier (1925) for the center of Paris, he proposed such radical changes for Habana Vieja that the urban fabric would have been utterly destroyed. Sert’s heartless, technocratic approach is all the stranger in hindsight since CIAM, of which Sert was president, had just organized the Heart of the City conference in Hoddesdon (UK) in 1951. The plan is showing all the inherent ambiguities of wanting to create a humanist center by destroying it. However, it was the consensus amongst modern architects at that time that some sacrifices needed to be made in order to have the city function as a well-tuned machine. And even at that time, Habana Vieja was seen as dilapidated and overcrowded.

Just like Le Corbusier, Sert pardoned the most important monuments, that would remain untouched; an interpretation of heritage, focused on single objects, which is typical for modernist thinking on the value of history. He introduced the widening of Vieja’s picturesque streets, highly motivated by the predicted growth of car traffic. All building blocks would be hollowed out to create (parking) patio’s. Pedestrian and car traffic would be separated. All the classic CIAM principles –the separation between

---


5. The 1952 Condominium Law or Ley de Propiedad Horizontal is explained in: Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, Havana. Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis, University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 121
the four functions of the city: housing, working, traffic, recreation were introduced. A central strip in Havana Vieja was reserved for commerce and banking. Just off the Malecon, Sert projected an artificial island for recreational use, with casino’s and hotels. In the eastern side of the harbor a zone was designated for government facilities. Part of those was the presidential ‘Palace of the Palms’, which was taken out of the center and put at a distance, glorifying political power in general and the dictator in particular.6

As a context for understanding Alamar, a different aspect of Sert’s plans is relevant. His Plan Piloto de la Habana included the scale of the region and proposed to correct the unbalanced development of Havana. To the eastside of the harbor up to Cojimar and beyond, new roads and urban areas were planned to connect the city to the new suburbs on the eastern beaches.

An assignment of the national government of Batista, Sert’s plan catered for the developers and speculators who were looking for new places to invest and create a profit. And while his inner city plans never took off, the outlines for the extension of Havana in eastern direction did.

Go East!

Havana had for a long time been growing eccentically in western and southern direction. In the west, along the coast, Miramar accommodated the rich; to the south, the extensive features of ‘Havana Profunda’ housed the lower and middle class; the urban poor lived in slums.7

The attraction of the beaches to the east of Havana had led to suburbs like Santa Maria del Mar, gradually filling up in the fifties with villa’s and beach houses of all kinds, experimental and plain, exuberant and more modest, modernist-monumental, rational, Spanish or Ranch style. To get there took quite a long drive around the harbor. It was the barrier of the harbor which prevented the areas immediately on the other side of the bay to become urbanized. Plans for a bridge had been blocked because ship travel would be hampered. Of course, a tunnel, though far more expensive, would not cause the same problems. In 1955 the building of the tunnel started, a French engineering office teamed up with Cuban engineers and designers and in 1958 the tunnel, which was proclaimed one of the seven engineering wonders of Cuba (in 1997), opened for traffic.

Of course, the investments in the tunnel were not just made to create a more balanced urban development; the commercial, touristic and residential potential of this huge empty stretch of coastal land, so close to the center of the city, was clearly enormously promising. Based on the outlines for urbanization which were proposed in Sert’s Plan Piloto de la Habana, development began.

7. Havana Profunda is the name of the area in the South of Havana, also called Diez de Octubre.

The first requirement for development was access. The American firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill, which had also advised on the execution of the tunnel, designed the Via Monumental to provide this, running from the tunnel entrance to the existing Via Blanca which is the main road to the eastern suburbs. The toll road, a 100 meters wide, 6-lane carriageway, is still astonishing; just like anything else in Habana it is stuck in the fifties, with its typically 50s design lighting poles and the pristine and mostly empty stretches of concrete surface, elegantly flowing through the landscape. There is none of the traffic signs or advertising billboards that usually line any highway, only a morbid billboard claiming the US Blockade of Cuba is the biggest genocide in history.

After the Via Monumental, SOM continued around 1954 with the design for the area closest to the center, then called Habana del Este (nowadays Camilo Cienfuegos).
It was going to be a city for 100,000 residents, orderly arranged in four similar neighborhoods, of which each had a central square with church and school, and a touristic center with hotels and facilities on the seaside. The beaches would provide public access, in contrary to the private beaches in Santa Maria del Mar, which were closed to visitors. These suburbs shared a commercial city center along the Via Monumental, which included shopping of all sorts on a pedestrian platform, designed according to the latest urban planning insights, and flanked by 20 high rise apartment buildings, for which an American investor had already been found.

Suburban Alamar

Around the same time in 1957, just before the revolution, the development started of the most eastern part of the city which Sert had allocated in his Plan Piloto for urban extension. Roads and infrastructure—water, sewage, electricity—were being laid out in Alamar. Ads in the daily newspapers show a surveyor and multiple images of workers building streets and infrastructure, proving how Alamar will soon become a reality.

This area, ‘the Top of Habana del Este’ was going to have less of an urban character than neighboring Habana del Este, which had a more diverse character in housing typologies, heights and program. Instead Alamar was intended as the first of the string of coastal suburbs which up to that moment started with Santa Maria del Mar; it was going to be typical suburb modelled along the lines of the American prototype, a low-density area with winding roads lined by luxury villa’s. While Habana del Est was designed for a mix of incomes, Alamar would cater for the rich.

The plots in the south of Alamar (now: districts 9-11) were the first ones being marketed by the development firm which advertised the new area as being close to the city center (a 6-minute drive) and to the beaches (also a 6-minute drive), conveniently located outside the hustle and bustle of the center with its traffic and pollution. The slogans tell it all: “Asi de cerca tendrá usted La Habana, Alamar” (So close will you have Havana, Alamar); “Costa Azul de Alamar le ofrece una residencia diseñada para usted. Clima de comodidad” (Costa Azul Alamar offers a residence designed for you. Climate comfort). The pictures convey a clear image of the targeted population: one image shows a young stylish woman with stiletto heels in a modernist design, a butterfly chair. In another picture the same woman looks out dreamily over the coastline in her elegant dress. Speculation was also a clear motive for aspiring inhabitants as the slogans betray: “Sow money where money grows” and “Este es el momento de comprar en Alamar y ganar dinero rápidamente” (This is the time to buy in Alamar and win money quickly). Even up to March 1959 Alamar was advertised along these lines and not unsuccessful: at that point about 10% of the plots was sold and built.

Triumph of the revolution

And then… The revolution triumphed. The long stretched movement for independence, which had already started with Jose Marti, continued during the first half of the 20th Century with a series of student protests and numerous riots, entered its final stage with the landing of Fidel and his revolutionary troops in 1956 with the boat Granma. After fighting his way from Eastern Cuba to Havana, he made his triumphant entrée in the capital at January 8, 1959. One week before, on New Year’s Eve 1958/1959, Eugenio Batista had fled Cuba. Castro called the triumph of the revolution and took his entree in the Hilton Hotel which had been opened just six months before. He provocatively renamed it the Habana Libre. Casinos were stormed and the roulette tables were burned in the streets. No one really hated gambling, but as it had become to symbolize the American overtaking of the island, everything having to do with gambling needed to be destroyed.

Developments were very quick and radical in the first days of the revolution. The mob, Batista-supporters, but also architects and developers fled the country in subsequent waves, and all urban developments in Havana came to a

9. Idem
standstill. Fidel Castro, El Commandante, said ‘Stop’. Carlos Puebla, the Singer of the Revolution’, composed the song ‘Y en eso llegó Fidel’ (‘And then Fidel arrived’) on this decisive moment, which interestingly clearly points at aspects of the urban development and economy of Cuba as the stumbling stones for the new revolutionary regime: speculation, the unlimited building of apartment houses and land grabbing are clearly pointed out as the bad practices that crippled the Cuban population:

Aquí pensaban seguir ganando el ciento por ciento con casas de apartamentos y echar al pueblo a sufrir

Y seguir de modo cruel contra el pueblo conspirando para seguirlo explotando... y en eso llegó Fidel

Here they wanted to continue taking everything for a 100%, having apartment houses, and making people suffer.

And continuing in a cruel way to conspire against the people to continue exploiting them... and then Fidel arrived.

10. www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwTIvG1i_g

Se acabó la diversión, llegó el Comandante y mandó a parar (Bis)

Aquí pensaban seguir diciendo que los ratreros, forajidos bandoleros asolaban al país

Y seguir de modo cruel la costumbre del delito hacer de Cuba un garito... y en eso llegó Fidel

Se acabó la diversión, llegó el Comandante y mandó a parar (Bis)

Here they wanted to continue, swallowing and swallowing the land, not suspecting that in Sierra Maestra the future was born.

And continuing in a cruel way the custom of crime to turn Cuba into a gambling den... and then Fidel arrived.

Y seguir de modo cruel con la infamia por escudo difamando a los barbudos... y en eso llegó Fidel

Aquí pensaban seguir jugando a la democracia y el pueblo que en su desgracia se acabara de morir

Y seguir de modo cruel sin cuidarse ni la forma con el robo como norma... y en eso llegó Fidel

Se acabó la diversión, llegó el Comandante y mandó a parar (Bis)

Here they wanted to continue pretending to be democrats, and people would just die in their misery.

And continuing in a cruel way, not caring how it was done, with robbery as a rule... and then Fidel arrived.

Y seguir de modo cruel sin cuidarse ni la forma con el robo como norma... y en eso llegó Fidel

Se acabó la diversión, llegó el Comandante y mandó a parar (Bis)

The fun was over, El Comandante came and ordered them to stop. (encore)

The fun was over, El Comandante came and ordered them to stop. (encore)

The fun was over, El Comandante came and ordered them to stop. (encore)

Se acabó la diversión, llegó el Comandante y mandó a parar (Bis)
Bringing all spatial development plans for Havana to a standstill was not just a symbolic gesture, a punishment for the hedonistic Havana that had extradited itself to capitalism and the US and thus had become a Sodom and Gomorrah of gambling, prostitution and exploitation. It was a radical but understandable break with the unbalanced economic development in which Havana absorbed all investments on the island. The unbalanced spatial development of Cuba reflected the colonial interests based on the export of raw materials; while Havana developed into a metropolis, the countryside consisted mainly of sugar plantations. In 1959, Havana had 1.3 million inhabitants, the second largest city, Santiago de Cuba had barely 200,000. Castro put a brake on investment in Havana and aimed at deconcentration to develop the smaller cities and the rest of the island.

The segregation within the cities and the poverty in which many Cubans were forced to live, was one of the spearheads of Castro’s policy. Immediately he took the immensely popular and drastic measure to reduce the rents by 50%, under the motto: housing is not a commodity but a right.

He also immediately began cleaning up the slums, which was facilitated by the many empty houses left behind by the Cubans who fled the country; many of them in Habana Vieja, but also of course in the most expensive residential areas. Since then, many poorer families live in the old town and government departments, student organizations and various institutions are accommodated in the glamorous villas of the former well to do.

Apart from the pragmatic reasons to do so, it is hard to avoid the impression that the ‘foreign’ modernist architecture was infected in the eyes of the revolutionary regime as a symbol of the influence of America. Sert’s island with casinos and hotels, brutally placed in front of the Malecon; the presidential palace, positioned like a temple on the other side of the bay looking down on the city, as one of the Spanish forts; the way in which plots in Alamar were shamelessly advertised as speculation, with images of an American / Western lifestyle that didn’t care about the needs of most Cubans but focused sans gene on the small elite who could afford it. Modernist architecture visualized the injustice.

In Cuba, wealth coincided with the modernist style. Unlike in Europe, where modernism coincided with social housing, the modernist social projects in Havana could be counted on the fingers of one hand.\footnote{12}

Of course the Hilton Hotel, which had just officially opened six months before the triumph of the revolution, was the ultimate symbol of American influence, globalization and capitalism and therefore was confiscated immediately by Castro and the Rebel Army. It was in every way a well-chosen symbolic act of Castro to making this building into his headquarters.

The modernist aesthetics was connected to the politics of Batista, the US and the mafia and was in a suspicious corner. Many modern Cuban architects, Cuban and foreign developers and speculators left the country as soon as they learned that the options to undertake architecture and real estate development as a profitable business had come to an end under Castro’s rule.

The socialist urban ideal

Despite the fact that many houses became empty and available after the triumph of the revolution, there was still a huge need for additional housing. While the bourgeoisie migrated to the US, workers and peasants from the countryside migrated to Havana, overflowing the capital. Castro founded the National Institute of Savings and Housing (INAV), led by the invariably described as charismatic or even mythical director Pastorkita Nunez.\footnote{13} She was given the task of devising an alternative spatial strategy for housing. She developed with her team new housing typologies, often with characteristic scale roofs and of high quality, that were seen as ‘a model in socialist Cuban urbanism’.\footnote{14} With the income from the State lottery, one of the few gambling elements that were continued by the communist government, building orders were given to private contractors who were still allowed to exist at that moment.

In 1961 a beautiful neighborhood was built by INAV consisting of 400 bungalows in the western part of Alamar. They are known as ‘the Russian bungalows’, because they housed the technical advisers who came to help Cuba and advise on the development of the country; apparently most of them were of Russian origin. The friendly bungalows come in several variations, but all are characterized by their small shell roofs, which they have in common with the social housing blocks developed by INAV in other parts of the city.

Next to that, INAV re-interpreted the existing plans for Havana del Este within the new revolutionary context. SOM’s plan was already redesigned by a group of Cuban architects in 1958, but now it needed to happen again; now no longer with a scope on tourism and shopping, but on public housing; no longer for the wealthy class, but consisting of affordable apartments.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item 12. Pogolotti (1910-1913), Lutgardita (1929) and Luyano (1944)
  \item 14. Idem
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The 'Russian Bungalows' in Alamar
(source: INTI, 2015)
From 1959-1961 Unit I was constructed, according to housing designs by Mario González, Hugo d’Acosta-Calheiros and others. Habana del Este was the urban utopia of the revolution, but also closely followed the ideals of the European New Town movement. It was designed as a composition of high-rise condominiums and walkup flats of four storeys around an open green area with sports fields. The infrastructure consisted of a hierarchical traffic system with a separation of through traffic and pedestrians. The neighborhood had many amenities: schools, gyms, shopping and community services. To this day it is a nice area because of its smart design of streets and public space, the variety and design of its architecture, and purely because of the quality of its housing it is still considered a desirable place to live.

The district was proudly presented at the VII Congress of the International Association of Architects (UIA) held in Havana in 1963. But already on that occasion Fidel Castro proclaimed that the number work was discouraging: Habana del Este was too good and too expensive and it could not be repeated. In 1961 the American boycott had started after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion; of the many things that were needed in revolutionary Cuba, housing was one of the first things sacrificed. Castro explained: “You could say that this unit [in Havana del Este] is ideal from our point of view [because of] the construction, the urban housing... but also because it is the type of construction that was beyond our means... And so, naturally, we don’t construct those large buildings anymore. We now try to find variety in other forms, but not by erecting tall buildings”.15

Microbrigades

But if the carefully planned and designed Habana del Este was too expensive, what then? For a number of years in the remainder of the sixties, Castro let the ‘free market’ or individual house builders, meet their own needs. A for a communist country surprisingly high percentage of self-built housing was erected.

But it was not enough. Housing shortages roared. In 1970 Castro admitted: "Yes Mister America, socialism is hard to build". Therefor Fidel Castro announced in 1971 a rather unique and revolutionary idea, mobilizing the people to build their own houses by organizing them in Microbrigades. People who actually worked in a factory, office or hospital formed building brigades of 33 people, mostly men but also women, who instead of making cigars, machines or nursing people would turn to building, doing masonry or fixing plumbing. In 9 months a Microbrigade would build one apartment

building after which many of them would have the chance to move into one of their self-built apartments.

In 1971 already 444 Microbrigades existed and in 1975 30,000 workers constituted 1,150 Microbrigades that built more than 25,000 apartments as well as schools and public buildings. By 1983, the brigades had completed 100,000 units nationwide.17

There was hardly any urban planning consideration on the best places where housing could be erected. Pragmatically three expansion areas were designated in the 70s where still a number of voids remained, who were ready for construction but never completed because of the revolution. These areas were the San Augustin, Alta Habana and Alamar: neighborhoods partly built up with detached or semi-detached villa’s, frivolous suburbs into which the Microbrigades now inserted their crude concrete apartment blocks on any empty lot which resulted in a quite curious cityscape.

In Alamar existed the most space by far. At that time there were some villa’s lying scattered about Alamar and INAV had in 1961 built the 400 ‘Russian bungalows’ in the western part of the area. Apart from that, there was just the infrastructure of water, sewer and electricity and the pattern of streets waiting to be filled in.

Just like in San Augustin and Alta Habana also in Alamar the urban plan was not adjusted for accommodating the new typology of walk-up flats that were built by the Microbrigades. Pragmatically the existing infrastructure was considered a given and the brigades built around and in between the here and there already realized villa’s and the bungalow district.

Based on the existing infrastructure of winding roads, designed for villas and detached houses in low density, the Microbrigades built a city for 100,000 people. The walk-up flats of four and later -at the instigation of Fidel Castro and against the wishes of the technical direction in Alamar- also five floors were simply placed along the roads as if they were detached houses. Naturally this had all kinds of undesirable consequences for the orientation of the housing. It also meant that the careful formation of public space by the positioning of the blocks, as had happened in Habana del Este and as it was an integral part of modernist urbanism, was omitted in Alamar. As a result, public space in Alamar is ubiquitous, but of a curious or just plain bad quality.

Because of the forced acceptance of the existing urban scheme, Alamar has become a unique New Town, showing all the signs of a curious reversal. It is the only New Town in the world where the New Town planning principles (hierarchical ordering of neighborhoods and infrastructure, and an equally hierarchic structure of public and collective services and amenities) were retroactively imposed on a suburban subdivision. The division in neighborhoods—or microdistricts as they are called after Russian example- is matched by a series of public services like schools, shops and swimming pools, while the city as a whole was equipped by a city center with a post office, community center, a cinema and some recreational buildings. This is where the description of Alamar will stop in this introduction: a detailed selection of all the sights and particularities of Alamar -architectural, urban and cultural- will follow after this introduction in the different chapters of this guide.

The guide
The preceding introduction is meant as an explanation of the unique background of how Alamar came about. Not only its suburban origins but also its Microbrigade construction roots make it special: we can consider Alamar as the unique Cuban form of self-organized or aided self-help housing.

Also after completion the district had a turbulent history with inimitable characteristics and inventions. These were triggered by necessity: after the fall of the Berlin Wall the profitable ties with the USSR evaporated, which caused an unprecedented economic and humanitarian crisis, euphemistically known as The Special Period. Due to its isolation Alamar was exceptionally affected by the lack of fuel which caused an almost complete absence of public transport. The dormitory town was on his own. Public services were cut and literally crumbled, pools closed, sports facilities shut down due to lack of maintenance, the cinema closed and the center of Alamar, which was never up to par with a city of 100,000 anyway, was all but forgotten. Because the Russian food imports came to a standstill and the American boycott didn’t leave any alternatives, people were suffering from actual hunger. This is when urban agriculture in Alamar started: the residents were forced to grow their own food. On the location of the planned hospital which never materialized, a farm (organopónico) was started. Due to the Special Period, during which pesticides and gasoline were unavailable, this and other organopónico’s in the abundant open space of Alamar developed itself into the world’s leading organic farming.

Another characteristic of Alamar that was born out of need was the thriving music scene. The lack of facilities for the large group of youth in Alamar and the relative isolation of the city from the center of Havana led to the development of a hip-hop scene, that translated the music from popular Miami radio stations into a Cuban version of hip hop. In the empty outdoor theater in Alamar, hip hop concerts were organized that the whole of Havana attended.

17. Idem, p. 218
These are only two examples of the vitality of Alamar, which, unlike many of her ‘family members’ in Europe, has developed into a lively area where Cuban street culture makes up for the monotony of the city’s architecture. Alamar still has many problems but also many opportunities, especially in light of the latest political developments. This guide was made under the guidance of the International New Town Institute by architecture students of the Technical University of Delft (TU Delft, the Netherlands) and the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE, Cuba). They shed their light on the current Alamar from the perspective of urban planning, architecture and urban culture. In subsequent chapters the topics of housing, public buildings, public space, connections, the beach, the music and culture of Alamar and its work and economy are described for each visitor interested in discovering this city. In the appendix, design proposals reflect on possible futures for Alamar. Just to mention a few ideas: they are speculating about development opportunities for the coast and the abandoned city center, about the future of the organoponico’s as a vital economic driver in Alamar and about the possibility of reviving the Microbrigades once again. I wish you an interesting journey to Alamar, either in real life or from the comfort of your chair.

Michelle Provoost
Director INTI
Prefabrication from the Soviet Union
At first sight, housing in Alamar looks all quite similar. You will find yourself passing by similar-looking grey and concrete buildings. By borrowing construction techniques from the Soviet Union, that donated a large-panel factory to Santiago de Cuba after hurricane Flora in 1963, Cuba developed a productive construction industry, mainly focusing on concrete. The construction factories produced a fixed amount of standard prefabricated designs which were repeated all over the country. Besides the services from the Soviet Union, the government was also experimenting with other building methods from Europe. Therefor some people say socialism is equivalent to public housing and prefabrication.

To reduce the monotony of the urban blocks, they were painted in bright colors. Now that the colors are vanishing, buildings look more and more the same. But in fact, there are many different types of prefabricated housing that one could distinguish and recognize in Alamar. Most of the housing blocks are long, rectangular and five stories high, but subtle differences can be found as a consequence of the used prefabrication technique. The following pages will give you an overview of the different types of construction techniques found in Alamar, including their main components such as common vertical circulation and exterior spaces.

Chapter II: Housing in Alamar

This chapter of the travel guide will provide you with background information about the history and main characteristics of the housing in Alamar. Housing is the social mirror of a city, according to Lopez Castaneda: the residential stock reflects the social contradictions of a city. So following Castaneda, to get to know and start to understand a city like Alamar, housing could serve as a good starting point. Furthermore we will show you one of the main features that makes Alamar different from other New Towns: the informality and land appropriation by residents, specifically found in the courtyards. At the end of this chapter you will find the "housing highlights" of Alamar, that will take you along different points of interest. The numbers in the text refer to the map of the walk on pages 32-33.

Housing policy
In 1959, the revolutionary government of Cuba defined three new basic principles for their urban housing policy. Firstly: to put an end to land and housing speculation. The second principle was to favor low-income Cubans burdened by high rents and lower the rent by 50%. And the third principle was concerned with building housing for workers and farmers. Besides these principles, the Cuban government also decided to give preference to apartment complexes and to come up with technical building solutions to compensate for the lack of building materials, as a result of the U.S. embargo of 1960. These principles and objectives of housing in socialist Cuba, can be easily discovered in Alamar with its prefabricated, Soviet- style architecture apartments.

Besides technical solutions, another aspect of the housing policy is visible in Alamar. As a new principle, the state started to rely on active participation of the future residents of the new housing units. The state supplied building materials and designated where units needed to be built, while the future tenants actually built the five-story apartment buildings designed by the government. They organized themselves in so called Microbrigades: a team of thirty-three workers responsible for the construction. The Microbrigades were formed within a place of work, like a factory or school, which gave them a unique focus. In Alamar, the Microbrigades were mainly formed by workers from a metallurgical factory.

Prefabrication from the Soviet Union
At first sight, housing in Alamar looks all quite similar. You will find yourself passing by similar-looking grey and concrete buildings. By borrowing construction techniques from the Soviet Union, that donated a large-panel factory to Santiago de Cuba after hurricane Flora in 1963, Cuba developed a productive construction industry, mainly focusing on concrete. The construction factories produced a fixed amount of standard prefabricated designs which were repeated all over the country. Besides the services from the Soviet Union, the government was also experimenting with other building methods from Europe. Therefor some people say socialism is equivalent to public housing and prefabrication.

To reduce the monotony of the urban blocks, they were painted in bright colors. Now that the colors are vanishing, buildings look more and more the same. But in fact, there are many different types of prefabricated housing that one could distinguish and recognize in Alamar. Most of the housing blocks are long, rectangular and five stories high, but subtle differences can be found as a consequence of the used prefabrication technique. The following pages will give you an overview of the different types of construction techniques found in Alamar, including their main components such as common vertical circulation and exterior spaces.

Gran Panel VI construction system (1)
The Soviet Union donated a Gran Panel factory to Cuba, which led to this method becoming a widely used construction system for apartment buildings. In Alamar we can find a few apartment complexes built according to this system. In comparison to the apartment complexes build with the E14 construction system (see below), these complexes are relatively small. The common staircases are usually placed within the building block, while the balconies are most of the time built as extensions of the main building (figure 2.3). As the name already suggests: large panels of concrete are used for a full apartment facade on one side of the building. Therefore the Gran Panel construction system doesn’t allow generous openings in the facade, giving the apartment complexes often a rather closed-off feeling.

E14 construction system (2)
The other main prefabrication system one can find in Alamar is the E14 construction system. This is one of the most repeated systems in Alamar. Its characteristics are the long rectangular apartment buildings, quite often situated in parallel pairs, creating an self-appropriated courtyard in between. These self-defined courtyards by inhabitants in between the blocks are one of the main features of Alamar, that will be described in the next pages. The apartments inside have little flexibility to be transformed when the household gets an extension or the composition of the household changes. These shortcomings become especially visible in the apartment buildings constructed with the E14 system. Where the Giron system has its main components within the perimeter, the balconies of the E14 housing blocks are usually placed outside of the main volume, either directly next to the stairwell or at the end of the block. The common staircase itself is placed within the main building volume and is less visible from the outside (figure 2.4).

Giron construction system (3)
One of the most well-known and broadly used construction systems in Cuba is the Giron system. This was primarily used to construct secondary schools: in total more than 500 schools were built using this prefabricated construction system.

Later, the use of this construction systems was extended and used to construct hospitals, hotels and housing blocks.

In Alamar, relatively many public buildings are constructed using the Giron system. The buildings are often freely placed in between the rectangular housing blocks, allowing the system to make extensions or wings in a flexible way. Even though it wasn’t meant to construct houses, in Alamar many housing blocks are built with the Giron system. The main components, the common stairwell and the balconies are placed inside the block’s perimeter. This gives the blocks an open facade, making the activities of the inhabitants visible on the outside (figure 2.5).

Informal courtyards (4)
While you are walking in between the different construction systems, you must have noticed that the ground floor is not always visible or accessible anymore. Unfortunately, Alamar failed to take a look at criticisms of the prefabricated apartments and take advantage of inventive ideas, like Le Corbusier’s pilotis. This idea shows a mixed use of the ground floor, with possible services like bars, shops and restaurants. The absence of such a mixed-use ground floor resulted in a ‘no man’s land’: large green areas surrounding the impersonal prefabricated structures. As a response, adaptations made by the residents themselves, created a different and new identity for Alamar.

The main feature, which makes Alamar different from the other parts of Havana, are the illegal add-ons and land appropriations you can find in and around the building blocks. While these expansions may seem an insignificant detail, they are the most important component of the daily life in Alamar. Originally, the neighborhood was composed using only residential housing blocks, not leaving any space for other activities besides housing.

However the everyday life and needs of the residents expressed itself in a very pragmatic way, which didn’t go along with planning ideals of that time. The extensions directly suit the demands of the individual. Self-build sheds became a place for selling, meeting, making, buying, creating and showcasing. It became the reason why streets in Alamar are flourishing with life, which is quite unusual to see in any other New Town. It also makes this satellite city more
sustainable, as residents do not necessarily need to visit the center of Havana, in order to find shops or other daily supplies. These illegal add-ons of course contradict with the core idea of this neighborhood, as it was meant to be a neatly planned, orderly modernist environment. The Cuban government considers these sheds as degrading the image of Alamar, therefore the future of these arbitrary extensions is unpredictable.

**MD construction system (5)**

When we walk further, you can find two buildings that can not be easily classified within the previously discussed construction systems. These buildings can be found along the originally planned center of Alamar, which is the main infrastructure axis. They are made according to the MD construction system. The main difference with the surrounding buildings is easily recognizable: the height. The buildings consist of twenty floors and have, in contrast to the other housing, a different use of the ground floor. Also a corridor on the ground floor allows you to walk through the building to the other side.

**New development (6)**

Behind the MD towerblocks, bright colors indicate the latest developments in Alamar. Considering these new buildings, you can easily recognize the same ‘errors’ as were made in the rest of Alamar. Despite the effort of making public space more coherent, the confusion between public and private is still present. Even though the new blocks were built only few years ago, there are already signs of the same ‘public space appropriation’ found in the other parts of Alamar. Appropriation itself is not a bad phenomenon, but it might cause again a possible new conflict between residents and authorities in the near future.

Another essential misstep is the mono-functional approach. Strong communities and public life is deeply embedded in the Cuban culture. In practical terms, this always comes with some level of trading and entrepreneurship. The housing blocks should reserve space and offer a certain level of flexibility to adopt spaces for their changing needs. Otherwise, the result will be again a residential area that will be dependent on transport to and use of other parts of the city.

**IMS construction system (7)**

The IMS construction system is a technology that is not imported from the Soviet Union, but from Yugoslavia. Services regarding this system were provided by the IMS institute in Belgrade, Serbia. With three factories in Cuba, this system is widely used in the whole country. Apartment blocks built with this technology are up to twelve stories high and can be recognized by their central staircase in the middle of the building. Also the width of the blocks is significantly longer than the other blocks in Alamar.

**Bungalows (8)**

Amongst the prefabricated Soviet-style architecture we can find some strangers in our midst at the end of the “housing highlights” walk. On the way to the beach a collection of single and freestanding bungalows can be found. Before Alamar was planned as a socialist housing neighborhood in 1970, the urban infrastructure was already laid out in preparation for a single-family housing neighborhood, serving the bourgeoisie of Cuba, comparable to an American suburb. In this neighborhood of bungalows Alamar looks suddenly like the suburb it was planned like in the fifties.

These bungalows are not from the 1970s or 1980s, as the rest of Alamar, but were built in the early 1960s by INAV, the revolutionary housing institute. They were used by the government to accommodate technicians and scientists from the Soviet Union, living in the bungalows.

Currently, some of the residents of Alamar are housed in these bungalows. If you look carefully, a few of the bungalows accommodate other functions than residential use. For example, one can find a lawyer’s office, a restaurant or a shop in the bungalows. It is a great example of mixed-use that shows opportunities, which could be integrated in the rest of Alamar in order to

---

make this New Town less dependent on the city center of Havana.

Having seen the bungalows, we finish our walk. The housing blocks will stay, but what about the self-created courtyards and their informal additions? While the economic situation in Cuba is still in development the additions have become a main instrument to earn a living. You would hope that the authorities wouldn’t take away their main source of income without offering a sustainable alternative. Besides this, the proximity of different services is not only practical, but also very sustainable as people can reduce their dependence on transportation and logistics to other parts of Havana. However, rapid changes within Cuba’s political structure will inevitably bring more wealth and opportunities to its society. It will perhaps also bring more legitimacy to the government to ‘clean up’ Alamar. The very essence of this unique New Town is facing a risk to vanish. So for now, be the witness of this unique phenomenon – visit one of the courtyards of Alamar in between its world of prefabricated housing.
Along this route you can find all types of housing and construction systems described in the chapter. In about 30 minutes all topics will pass by to give you a better understanding of residential Alamar!

**HOUSING HIGHLIGHTS WALK**

1. Gran Panel VI-system block
2. E14-system block
3. Giron-system block
4. Courtyard area
5. MD tower block
6. New developments
7. IMS system block
8. Bungalows
Sometimes our wanderlust takes us to secluded outskirts in scenic settlements and sometimes we find ourselves refreshed by the quiet which persistently lives on in some lesser known areas. The New Town of Alamar, a social housing suburb, is such a place. It is overly monofunctional and may insinuate boredom, however what you do find here is a public system of facilities underlying the housing blocks. Furthermore, you may also experience some forgotten gems of architecture and public buildings serving the culture of the Cuban people. A lost platform of culture and art which was once strong but has faded away along with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, fragments of the public realm are still somewhat accessible and alluring for the architecture lover.

Chapter III:
Public Buildings in Alamar

Top down planning
The planning of Alamar happened under inspiration of the Soviet Union, and consisted of a set of ideal living blocks in an dispersed environment. All too utopian, the actual result was a top down planning approach of state control and organisation, as well as a hierarchic series of public facilities located amongst the social housing fabric. There was strategic planning and an interest in the people but often with an inadequate social understanding of their needs. Public utilities, administration and culture are in general sparse thereby enhancing the picture of a monofunctional town. This is underlined by the nickname of Alamar’s District X, “Siberia”, which brings an association with the Russian isolated and distant region, derived of utilities and vegetation.

Communal system
Apart from the public spaces developed top down by the state, you’ll find in Alamar spaces developed by the residents themselves. Informal car storages, grocery carts and community organised events and gatherings are some of the more spontaneous organized initiatives. These small scale projects and natural public meeting points form the social alternative for the public spaces developed by the state. Thereby, the people themselves adjust the sparse available public program with their own needs. Although the state distributed also a series of cultural institutions, many of these have not survived over time because of poor and maltreated circumstances, but still rest as a reminder of the cultural intentions of Alamar’s planners.

Unfinished plan
The Alamar plan of the post revolution era covered all districts of the New Town. The plan envisioned an axis from the sea front in the North, cutting through the town to the South, filling this space mainly with public facilities as a public axis. Additionally, the plan featured a long green open space cutting the city from West to East (see fig. 3.1). The axis as an urban element is frequently used for integrating public facilities in Soviet planned cities. However as seen with many other socialist/modernist plans in Europe (like Tirana or Zagreb) they are rarely completed, and the plan of Alamar suffered the same level of poor execution. The plan was abandoned due to economic and political circumstances. One of the outcomes of this unfinished welfare plan was that the initiative of a hospital located close to the intersection, was abolished and its plot left vacant. Later this space was spontaneously reprogrammed as an organoponico which has successfully come to sustain Alamar (see fig. 3.1). Additionally, the plan intended to structure the town with a future city center, but also this was left as an unfinished and abandoned project. The public axis also suffered identity flaws as a result of never realised public buildings. Notably the land on the seafront was left undeveloped and untouched enhancing even stronger the identity of an unfinished plan rather than a public axis (see fig. 3.3).

Public architecture
Allocating public buildings throughout the ten districts of Alamar clearly depicts a pattern of distribution. Firstly, the location of the buildings confirm the vague presence of a public axis and
Fig. 3.5: The map indicates all public buildings, facilities and programs spread around the New Town. A system of entities appears, since many districts have the minimum of facilities present.
Fig. 3.6: A church in district III housed in one of the pre-revolutionary houses. The closed facade of the church makes it appear uninviting and unwelcome, however this is a highly used communal place where people gather, eat and socialize.

Fig. 3.7: Districts of Alamar

Fig. 3.8: Alamar seen as a New Town structural system of public buildings

Fig. 3.9: Zoom of one entity and its subsystem of available public facilities

secondly it demonstrates how each district holds the minimum set of facilities for their own needs, creating ten entities that can work separately. The structure of all districts is located along the West-Eastern axis systematizing the availability of the public amenities, while the more particular ones, that function on the scale of Alamar as a whole, are located in the central part. So whenever locals of District 9 needs more advanced services, they need to allocate themselves from their own entity to District 1. (See fig. 3.7-3.9)

Observing the public buildings in Alamar, it becomes evident how the diverse programs share some typological characteristics. A key element is the ubiquitous use of prefabricated construction principles which have been used for the majority of buildings. Prefabrication had become a strong symbol of modernism since the beginning, with the work of pioneers as Le Corbusier and his Modulor system.

Looking at the public program, some administrational, health and religious services are housed in small scale buildings (see fig. 3.11). They blend into the urban fabric without noise making it difficult particularly to outsiders to recognize the service. Additionally, public buildings have a lower height and number of floors compared to the high scale residential blocks.

Another typology is public program included in social housing blocks, on the ground floor. Along with a program in the lower floor, the MD-housing block along the main public axis has a passage way through the building, making public access easier and signaling public utilities (see fig. 3.12).

In Western culture you notice a high transparency between public services and the public. In Cuba, and Alamar, the facades of public buildings appear closed and uninviting. For climatic reasons of course, this is necessary to avoid over heating of buildings noting the small windows and trees shadowing in front, but on a cultural level this seems unfriendly and puts doubts to the opening hours of a place. What you also see from the street are fences and heavy concrete walls framing the building and plot, however this can also be because of local security reasons (see fig. 3.13).

Coincidence or not, but what most public buildings have in common is the Cuban fresh color of yellow and turquoise. In general, the buildings are in poor condition underlying the
Fig. 3.24: The Cultural Centre, a low heavy turquoise building situated in the presumed city centre which was never fully realised.

Fig. 3.25: Inside the Cultural Centre which is in the process of renovation. Notice also the prefabricated Giron construction elements.

Fig. 3.26: EnGuayabera, the new hip cinematic and theatrical place to be as a young citizen of Alamar.

Fig. 3.27: Outside the EnGuayabera, showing Alamar youth enjoying coffee culture.

**Infobox**

Right next to the Cultural Centre you find the small Tina Modotti Library. This yellow low building was built in 2001 as a reconstruction of its former building of 1973, and named in honour of Tina Modotti, an Italian photographer and key figure in Julio Antonio Mella’s murder of 1929: as the only witness of the assassination of a founder of the internationalized Cuban Communist Party, Tina Modotti was involved in the following investigations and the Mexican government tried to implicate her in the murder; however, the official position of the present Cuban government was that Mella was killed at Gerardo Machado’s orders (Cuban president), while admitting that Tina Modotti was a Stalinist operative who operated in a number of countries. (See fig. 3.11)

**Culture and communal projects**

The influence that the Soviet Union had on Cuba’s political sphere was clearly materialized in the changing of the built environment of Alamar and the construction of the Cultural Centre in particular (see fig. 3.24). The Soviet collaboration made the implementation of the projects possible within a period of 4 years, from 1982 until 1986. Designed with a focus on public realm, the new Cultural Centre aimed at the fulfilment of community needs for art. Dancing, theatre, acting and plastic arts such as painting and sculpture predominate. Given the increasing need for extra facilities, the buildings are currently under renovation with some more rooms for rehearsal purposes being added (see fig. 3.25). Additionally, the old storage will be demolished and a relatively big theatre will be constructed in its location. Moreover, the interest of the community of Alamar for having internet access has been considered and a specialized room completed with public computers will be available. Currently, due to the renovation of the building, the only usable space that the cultural centre provides is the entrance lobby. Considering its sufficient dimensions, some educational gatherings and workshops take place. To name just a few: issues concerning drugs, alcohol and sexual transmitted diseases are subject of activities, however also a program of basic skills such as cooking and writing can be required through courses.

**EnGuayabera**

An investment of 2.5 million pesos which was executed in the old Guayabera Factory (the typical Cuban shirt was called ‘guayabera’) to kickstart the cultural project of the EnGuayabera. To transform the old factory into a multifunctional center, the renovating process lasted for 6 months. By the end of 2015 it was inaugurated by the Minister of Culture. The factory was built during the 80s and continued the production of the guayaberas for 5 years. As it happened to many other factories the introduction of the “Special Period” in 1993 brought along the ending of its operation. Serving as a landmark for the whole city, this hip center already houses the branches of some social issues which Cuba is facing these years. Nevertheless, they stand together as a perfect time capsule of a Cuban culture of the 1970s and 1980s as well as an Alamarian identity.

**Tip**

In addition to a cultural walk around Alamar seeing cultural and public buildings, it is interesting to visit to one of Cuba’s strongest cultural symbols: the Cinema. In EnGuayabera you find a cinema, theatre, café, bar, bookshop and a playground. It is recognized as a very interesting spot for young people due to the provision of WiFi, which makes it the first and only location of that kind in Alamar. Considering the increasing need for internet access, this can be the main reason why the EnGuayabera works as one of the most frequented points for the community of Alamar. (See fig. 3.26 and 3.27)
messages. Renovation works of the theatre have already been planned but currently postponed. Another architectural landmark is the centrally located Cinema IX, the only cinema built in Havana after the revolution, which created a natural start of a city center in Alamar. However, the cinema had to close down since there was a lack of movie goers which steadily increased. The management of the cinema firstly decreased the number of shows to once a week, but when this suggestion was also met with a lack of interest, it closed completely (fig. 3.31). One destroyed landmark which is still fascinating to visit is the huge former swimming pool and its public bath facilities at the seafront. Hit by a hurricane, this provoked enormous damage, resulting in leaks of the water supply and thereby it was forced to close down.

Conclusion

Through studies of the public buildings and their architectural typologies in Alamar, it becomes evident that these stand out amongst the social housing fabric in the New Town. Their typologies vary a lot from the social block typology and they have become strong landmarks and navigating points. Although the New Town is quite monofunctional, there is an urgent need of more public facilities. Each district has good access to health care, elementary education and market shopping, but administrational buildings, work and cultural buildings are in high demand. People often need to take the bus out of their home district to reach daily facilities.

The public buildings in Alamar are mostly part of the standardized city development, which also adds them a specific and recognizable identity. However, as renovation works are being executed, these buildings shift their image, as can be seen in the new EnGuayabera. Other cultural buildings are waiting for the finances to be renovated and improved. Public buildings and facilities are important factors for a well-functioning city and they bring attraction to the city for visitors and foreigners, not to forget architectural lovers.

Very important institutions. Among these are the Cuban Institute for Art and Cinema, the National Council of Performing Arts, the Cuban Institute for Music and the Cuban Institute for Literature. Currently, this cultural complex houses several functions where the biggest building contains four cinema rooms of 40 seats and a theatre of 70 seats (see fig. 3.26). The biggest room is available for parties and weddings. Around an open playground some smaller buildings are located and the additional functions such as the restaurant, the ice-cream shop, and the Café Literario, the literature coffee shop, are easily accessible (see fig. 3.27).

Closed and destroyed projects

Alamar used to be a wealthy city in terms of cultural institutions and a strong art scene. However some of these important landmarks have been destroyed or taken out of function. But for an architectural lover, these places can still be seen, and even blessing you with more spirit and memories from an old era gone by. The Theatre of Alamar situated close by the seafront (see fig. 3.28) has been closed down and locked. Being a curious soul, climbing over the fence will reveal the ruins of an old amphi theatre beautifully placed in its surroundings (see fig. 3.29). The vegetation has taken over the concrete benches and artistic people have painted it with grafitti
Fig. 3.32: Terrain in front of the swimming pool with public bath facilities. Today this terrain is being used by local farmers taking their animals to graze here.
Chapter IV: Public Space in Alamar

Modernist town planning

Modernist town planning was an excessive analytical approach to space production. Top-down planning, as a solution for urban development, influenced huge parts of the world including Western Europe and the eastern Soviet Bloc after the Second World War and during the Cold War. Clearly, the development of Cuban urbanism was also influenced by its economic relations with the Soviet Union.

Within modernism existed a “belief in linear progress, positivist, technocratic, rational planning of social and geographic space; ‘standardized conditions of knowledge and production and a firm faith in the rational ordering of urban space’ to achieve individual liberty and human welfare”\(^3\). Modernist planners aimed to correct the ‘chaos’ of the city and create an ideal order.

The modernist town planning principles were accepted by the socialist state of Cuba and visualized in the standardization and the strong zoning of Alamar as the solution for the housing shortage. Fulfilling the demand of houses was perceived as the new essence of socialism and as a positive act towards the Cubans. The ideologies and plans found their application in the masterplans for Alamar of the 1970s, bringing into the Caribbean the modernist concept of public space mainly shaped by massive building arrangements around a central spine. The overdimensioned building blocks...

---

The original masterplan intended a uniform sequence of community spaces connected with each other. The diagram illustrates the fragmentation of the spaces as a result of deviation from the intended plan. A close analysis of the urban grain and the comparison to the city of La Habana brings forth one important aspect - the oversizing of public spaces that leads to a loss of intimacy.

Fig 4.5: Comparing urban grain in plan and section- above: Havana, below: Alamar

and public spaces were far from the local Cuban’s housing habits, which instead were closer to traditional and dense street-based urban environments.

What characterizes Alamar today is the high percentage of open and public space. From its original concept of space for recreation and community activities, it unfortunately evolved in neglected public space or space for private initiatives, like for example agriculture or ‘illegal’ space appropriation.

Uneven development
Alamar had as a main goal to solve the housing shortage of the period, providing places for 100,000 inhabitants. A sharp definition of the public spaces and the continuity of flow characterized its rational masterplan. The sea side and the main central spine of the city were supposed to provide the main quality of public life. However, the development met with enormous problems and after the masterplan of the 70s a different construction pattern was executed with a huge impact on public spaces.

The Lost Urban Grain
Several significant changes in the shape of public space can be observed in the existing structure of Alamar as compared to the original masterplan. The open and public space of Alamar represents a high percentage of its footprint, up to 70% of the total area. A reverse ‘Nolli Map’ (focusing on mapping the public space instead of the private buildings) establishes this contrast. Instead of a negative connotation, this can be considered a distinguishing quality from the dense urban fabric of La Havana. What really affects the negative image of today appearance is that the important central spine, meant as a gathering point, has never been realized, resulting in a neglected central space. From a space of recreation it has become a monocultural agriculture field, massively limiting its usability and permeability. The public space misses a hierarchy that adds to a sense of loss of orientation in the open space.
View from the road
Monotony leads to dull public spaces. Difference keeps us interested. The perception of public space is enhanced by the variety of the visual landscape. As Kevin Lynch wrote in his publication ‘The view from the road’ (1964), differences and landmarks can lead to a dramatic play of space and motion, of light and texture. These long sequences make our vast metropolitan areas comprehensible: the driver sees how the city is organized, what it symbolizes, how people use it, and how it relates to him. The kinesthetic perception helps to formulate a coherent image of the array of public spaces a town has to offer.

The map presents a variety of public spaces that can be found when taking a drive down the center spine of Alamar.

Navigating Public Spaces in Alamar
Even though distances can be long, Alamar is best experienced while meandering on foot. The map gives an overview of two routes: the first leads you to the popular spots that a first time visitor must see and the second is an alternative route for the more curious souls that gives a taste of the actual life behind the organoponico’s and banana plantations.
The ‘Must See’ Route of Public Spaces

M1: Organopónico Vivero Alamar is a thriving organic farm and contributes to the needs of people, offering a wide range of vegetables, ornamental and medicinal plants, and other food products. Vivero Alamar also provides community services, applies innovations in science and technology to the farm, and provides technical assistance and training to those interested at the local, national, and international level. Guided tours can be pre booked. Visit early in the morning to take home the fresh produce of the day. (http://farmcuba.org/#home)

M2: Along the southern ‘162’ offshoot of Avenida 7ma lies the brand new cultural center of Alamar, called Enguayabera. Home to recreation, cinema, event spaces, gymnasium, library and children’s activities, it is a potential future hotspot for public activities in Alamar.

M3: The brainchild of artist Hector Pascual Gallo Portieles Gallo’s Garden of Affection is an oasis in District X of Alamar, aptly titled ‘Siberia’ for being the furthest point in Alamar. The art gallery features thousands of steel sculptures. The art gallery started within Gallo’s ground floor apartment, but now extends outside and is packaged neatly within his front yard. The garden has its origins in the ‘Special Period’ of Cuba which was characterized by the extreme lack of basic needs. This was how Gallo began to ‘plant’ pride and dignity in the Garden of Affections, where he grows ‘exotic plants of human nature’. By recycling junk, he endeavors to recover lost values.

M4: The largest Open Air Swimming Pool in Cuba lies parallel to Avenida Primera, the main street along the beach front of Alamar. At 6100 m² it is twice the size of an Olympic swimming pool. It currently lies vacant as the town ran out of resources for its upkeep and the dense palm plantations and sea breeze give it a unique function, like a temporary public square.

M5: Close to the pool, along the way to the beach, you will come across ‘Amfiteatro de Alamar’, a unique open air theatre and popular performance venue for Cuban music and hip hop artists.

M6: The Academia Militar Maximo Gomez is the training facility of the Cuban state military forces. The complex is off limits for regular visitors but the surrounding campus makes for a pleasant walk.

The Alternative Route of Public Places

A1: The supermercado as a social space: Alamar is divided into neighbourhoods. The physical structure of the supermarket stands out amongst the identical housing blocks. Since they are also the most important source of daily supplies, the supermercado is a hub of social exchange in Alamar.

A2: The regiment of public spaces: Each district shows an abundance of places without a defenition or purpose, which conveys a remarkable feeling of both rest and eagerness.

A3: Cine Alamar: XI Festival is the deserted cinema hall that was built with its back facing the Avenida de los Coco. It was named because it was inaugurated in 1978 when the XI World Festival of Youth and Students took place in Cuba. A boulevard was built to encourage public use of the precinct but it didn’t see much success.

A4: The ‘Amusement’ Park: The Parque de Diversion ‘José Martí’ is a one of a kind amusement park in Habana del Este. It was originally part of the nearby suburb of Tarara, but moved to Alamar in 2003. Nowadays, the equipment is in a state of disrepair; only two out of eleven machines are working, but people go here still.

A5: The centre that never was: The precinct of the Cine Alamar is also home to the old Casa de la Cultura, Escuela Popular de Angola and Escuela Primaria Jesus Menendez. The collection of a wide variety of public functions forms an ideal atmosphere for the creation of a public square. The catch: the cinema has its back to the street and a thick green belt physically separates the functions instead of transforming them into a mingling ground.

"In the post-war rush to turn town planning into an applied science much was lost - the city of memory, of desire, of spirit; the importance of place and the art of place-making..."

- Leonie Sandercock -
**A6: The pop up streets and corners:** The streets 160 and 162 in Zona 1 and Zona 6 respectively house several schools. The same street front also transforms into a lively street on weekday afternoons with several makeshift sheds selling food and knick knacks to the children on their way home from school.

**A7: The prosperous ones:** The parcels between Zona 1, 7 and 25 are home to single family bungalows originally built for soviet expats working as technical advisors to the Cuban government. Previously home to Russian dignitaries, one can also find a local supermarket named ‘Mercado de Los Rusos’. Characterized by wide streets, well defined and shaded sidewalks, houses with uniform precast barrel vault roof each with a front yard fenced off from the street, this zone is the most attractive portion of Alamar.

**A8: The Hip Hop Garage:** The vibrant Cuban Rap found his roots in the Special Period. While the Amfiteatro hosts some of the most popular music festivals in Cuba, keep your eyes open for tiny alleys and garages in Alamar where artists practise this form of art.
Chapter V: Connections

In Havana, one can get a strong sense of the importance of connections between people, cities and neighbourhoods. A connection is more than just a road, railway or radio frequency. A connection needs to be accessible, carefully maintained and be known in order to function well. A lack of functioning connections can easily isolate an entire neighbourhood, like it happened with Alamar’s District X; even to the point that its inhabitants feel estranged from the mother city and people start calling this neighbourhood ‘Siberia’. Things are slowly improving; for instance, public Wi-Fi has arrived in Alamar in October 2015. However, connections are still severely lacking. Moving from one place to another becomes a problem of communication: the bus transport provided by the government is insufficient and not reliable. Alamar has since long suffered from lacking connections. Being situated east of the bay, far from the city centre and only serviced by extremely cramped buses, Alamar has become its own separate world. The official transport system is plagued by shortcomings - timetables are not displayed and the delapidated condition of many vehicles often provokes failures that interrupt the service until an unpredictable moment.

But Habaneros have found ways to cope with the broken systems and lacking connections. The ‘Taxi collectivo’ is used to get around for a relatively low price, while within neighbourhoods the horse drawn carriage can still be found. Even trucks are converted into a means of transport, sometimes leading to dangerous situations. Thus, there is a division between the visible/formal connections, which are lacking in quality and quantity, and the invisible/informal connections, which have been created by the residents to deal with the problems. This is another factor showing the complexity of a city in transformation.

The neglected urban plan

After the idealistic city expansion of La Habana with Ciudad de Camilo Cienfuegos (formerly Habana del Este), which proved to be too expensive and slow to fulfil the increasing housing demands of the Cuban workers, the Alamar plan was created. The grid that was once meant for suburban villas was reused for the revolutionary cause. Instead of villa’s, constructed by private property developers, Microbrigades constructed rationalist building blocks. The masterplan of 1978 showed long 4 to 5 storey buildings in double rows and sleek high-rise towers. A main boulevard was planned, which would contain the central functions. This masterplan was ignored however, replacing the sleek towers with lower buildings in a denser, more rational building pattern. Alamar’s population increased to more than 100.000, after which the strict standards were lost and customisation by its residents started, giving Alamar its current look and feel.
How to get to Alamar?

Public Transport

Bus
Havana is equipped with a bus system that is decent and used to function well, but since the Special Period it lacks the capacity to serve well. Buses are cramped, schedules are irregular and queues are long. The buses itself often lack sufficient maintainence, occasionally leading to fires. Alamar is connected to Havana by three bus lines, which are the only official public transport lines to this neighbourhod. This means that people unable to afford a taxi collectivo are fully dependent on this service - making travelling to the city a long and cumbersome experience.

Sometimes, a relic from the Special Period can be seen on the street - the so-called ‘Camel’ bus, a passenger compartment hauled by a truck, serving as a bus. These are getting rare in Havana but are more commonly seen at the countryside.

Taxi national and collectivo
The taxi system is split in two categories: one owned and managed by the government (taxi national) and an informal organized net of private cars. The first one is simply identifiable by the yellow color and more modern vehicles. These taxi drivers are paid directly by the government, and for this reason they are more expensive. As usually happens on the island, Cubans organized an alternative and cheaper taxi service: private cars follow a predetermined path and, stopping at specific points in the city, they share it with other passengers (taxi collectivo), at the cost of 10 pesos national for medium legs, 20 pesos for longer ones.

Asking to these self-employed taxi drivers to drive you to a specific place becomes a lot more expensive, but is still negotiable. The spots where to take the collective taxi are usually on the main roads or near points of interest, identifiable by a high number of people waiting at the curb, even late at night.

Informal vehicles
Apart from bus and taxi, Cuba has invented countless special and sometimes curious means of transport. From one city to the other, you could be riding a horse, using a bicycle, or be sitting in the back of an improvised tuc tuc. The systems are usually defined by the distance they cover, but it is not excluded that for some pesos more you could reach a beach 10 km far away in the back of a horse drawn carriage.

On very long journeys, the most common means of transport is a lorry type bus, called Guàgua, that links zones of major interest (like the beaches on the coast, from one city to another) and has a fix cost of 10 pesos. The lorries run all day long, sometimes even at night, and are a really cheap alternative to the many tourist service coaches. The travel in one of these lorries can be described as a really typical Cuban experience: the low comfort is balanced by an all around view of the panorama from the open flatbed of the truck, a bit like being a worker who is heading to the fields.

The rest of possibilities is left to the imagination and the pragmatic spirit of the Cubans: every object that can become a vehicle represents a fruitful business.

Comfort and safety apart, the variation of the chosen means can always offer a different view on the city and what we are visiting, as well as entering in contact with the inhabitants and sometimes their traditions.

The only main recommendation: always keep an eye on the cost!
The investment of the tunnel consisted of 28.5 million pesos, which was equal to dollars at the time, plus 7.5 for the connecting ‘Monumental road’.

The payment construction was highly unusual: the Cuban state would not have to invest in the tunnel directly, but the landowners (seeing their land east of the tunnel increase in value) would finance by buying and then selling Cuban sugar to the French - essentially creating a win-win situation.

The urban planners of Havana had big plans for the east, calling it the ‘City of the Future’, creating a new urban area for 200,000 inhabitants, ministries and the Presidential Palace, plus offices. The entire governmental center of Havana would be moved to the east, where traffic problems would be solved, and more green space, parks and playgrounds could be built. Without the tunnel connecting east and west, the realization of this new utopian Havana would not be possible.

Right now, the tunnel is a source of inspiration for many Cubans. Riding through the tunnel is for many children the same as a ride in a ferris wheel or a rollercoaster. Many inhabitants of Alamar are not able to use this tunnel as much as they’d like, though. Owning a car is impossible for many and not all the bus lines go through it but take the long, cumbersome route around the bay instead.

If Cuba continues on the current path of increasing economic and entrepreneurial freedom, an increase in traffic is very likely. Especially when more Cubans are allowed or capable of buying a car, the Tunnel might soon become a congested funnel. Creating a second, parallel tunnel would be something of the far, far future, considering the state of current infrastructure in Havana. For the time being, this is not even remotely a problem - little traffic exists on the streets and highways today. But the value of this connection remains great and will continue to do so, especially for the residents of Alamar.
The remnants of pre-revolution infrastructure are still there, though. With some improvements and a couple of new roads, a beach promenade could be created, connecting Playas del Este with Alamar, Cojimar, Camilo Cienfuegos and eventually Habana Vieja.

With such new infrastructure, the current peaceful atmosphere might be in danger. With future economic growth and commercial activities, the seaside risks being overrun by foreign hotels and tourism-oriented business. Creating an extension of the Malecón would be a project of creating shared public space, oriented at both locals and foreigners. As seen on the Havana side, not that much is needed in order to foster a lively public space: a place to sit and talk, that is lit at night and protected against the crashing waves. Improving this concept with bicycle paths, public functions and making everything easily accessible would create a new reason to visit Alamar, and a reason for local residents to be proud of their neighborhood.

**Connection with water**

**Alamar Malecón**

The Malecón is maybe the most famous thoroughfare of Cuba, spanning 7 km along the Havana coastline. It runs from Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta, Habana Vieja, all the way up to the border between Vedado and Miramar. It was constructed in the early 20th century when the U.S.A. was in charge of the country, originally destined as a walking promenade, but quickly growing to its current size. With six lanes and a broad walking promenade it is, in present day, a main artery linking east and west. While being an important transport corridor, its social and cultural role cannot be underestimated. It serves as a major meeting place for locals and tourists alike - at nighttime the promenade transforms in a busy social space, often filled with thousands of Habaneros, chatting, drinking, flirting and eating at the seaside. At daytime, the run-down concrete walkway doesn’t seem to have the flair of spick- and-span Western promenades, nor the fancy furniture or palm trees - it is the bustling crowds at nighttime which prove the incredible value of this space.

When crossing the tunnel to the east side of the bay, the seaside immediately turns into deserted, decaying lands. The coast and beaches on this side of the bay are stony and at many places polluted with garbage. Infrastructure is absent in many places. One cannot help but wonder why the potential of this side of the bay has not been realized. The wasteland stretches all the way to Alamar and beyond, up to Playa del Este, where the sand is white and a mix of locals and tourists enjoys rum and Cristal beer. Only there the value of the beach has been turned into an attraction.

It is a sad thought that the community of Alamar lives at such a short distance of what could be a beautiful waterfront - but is a stony, desolated garbage dump instead.

**Mental connection**

Even though Alamar is a neighbourhood of Havana and roughly the same distance from its historical centre as the Bijlmermeer neighbourhood is from the canals of Amsterdam, the mental connection between Havana and Alamar has degraded because of the difficulty in covering this distance and the lack of functions. There is a bus system with three lines serving Alamar, but queues are long and buses are mostly filled to the brim with travelers. Micro X, the most distant part of Alamar, has the nickname ‘Siberia’ - it feels just as isolated, just as far from the central places that matter. Not only inhabitants of Siberia feel isolated, most residents of Alamar feel like they live so far away of Havana, that they don’t have much in common anymore. This is not good for the image of the neighborhood - many would rather live close to the old city centre. The good news is that connections can be improved - still, strengthening the mental connection will probably take a lot of time.
As an almost forgotten privilege among New Towns, Alamar has a seafront. Almost forgotten because of the limited function it now has for both the people of Alamar, but clearly present through its material and immaterial qualities, such as the sea breeze, cooling down the hot local climate. The coast stretches along five km of coral beaches facing the strait of Florida, bordering the bay of the river Cojímar and its fishing village on the east and the bay and the sandy beach of Bucaranao in the west.

This forgotten, abandoned place has its weirdly interesting characteristics that you would not expect.

The only way to relate to the estranging structures that you will find around Alamar’s beach is to understand where they came from and what future was envisioned for them. Since the political view, and with it the intention of the beach, changed during the development of Alamar and its beach, it left confusing sights for its modern-day visitors. Our understanding of the beach in its current form is based on field research and interviews with locals, distinguishing structures, functions, usage and culture, which all take place in a physical space.

Context
Alamar means: To the sea. When actually doing so, you have to leave the now purposeless ringroad meant as infrastructure for the never built part of the first zones of Alamar. From there, you will encounter a rocky but green space. A large part of the open space between the housing blocks and the seafront is taken up by dense bushes and dry but green grass. This part also provides a small stock of animals with food. You will see mostly goats and an occasional horse grazing both the grass and the bushes.

The underground is hard and rocky. Moving towards the sea some parts will be lined with palm trees until the ground finally changes in rock hard coral and stones on the seafront.

On the most western side of Alamar on the edge with the neighboring town of Cojímar there is a small bay, where the Cojímar river flows into the sea. It provides the locals with shelter for their boats. This was also a place where in times of austerity, such as the Special Period, people would depart for Florida with nothing more than the inner-tire of a truck as a floating device (flotilla).

Apart from the aforementioned structures, the space is not cultivated at all. The lack of people and the disregard of the space combined with the lack of human scale make it a very impersonal space, which doesn’t necessarily convey the feeling of safety. However, it is said that at the end of the afternoon the seafront attracts more locals looking for a cool breeze.

Chapter VI: Alamar Beach
Dangers of climate change
In response to climate change and sea level rise in the Caribbean, the Cuban government has established a policy framework to mitigate the risks. There are four types of coast: iron-shore low terrace, mangrove swamps, beaches and coastal cliffs.

Sea level rise has been identified as the main threat to the Cuban archipelago. Up to 84% of the beaches will be affected, which means that out of a total of 245 coastal settlements, 87 will be partially or completely affected, 34 settlements will be completely inundated and 18 479 persons will be displaced.

The Caribbean is vulnerable to hurricanes, every year some will strike the islands. Over the last decade 16 have hit Cuba, killing 30. This data shows that the amount and force of hurricanes is increasing over the past century, possibly as a result of climate change. Although the death toll is low in Cuba, thanks to education, warning systems and drills, the economic cost are high. In 2008 three hurricanes caused over 10 billion US dollars in damages.

Effects on Alamar
As can be seen on the elevation map, Alamar’s proximity to the shore also means that the city is vulnerable to natural disasters and sea level rise. Although the elevation along the shore is quite extensive (between 5-10 meters), there are no necessary dunes or dikes providing extra defense. The last couple of districts -including the poorly built District X- have buildings right up to the shoreline. The effects of storms battering the constructions on the coast for years and years are reflected in the state of the bunkers as well as the pool, showing extensive damage and debris.

Speculating about undefined spaces
Havana grew on the west side of its bay since its first settlement, leaving long stretches of undeveloped untouched coasts on the east side for a long time. When Habana del Este started to be developed under Batista’s regime in the 1950’s, this was a chance to use the unspoilt nature available. The idea for Alamar was to create a luxurious living environment for the upper class, with villas facing the seaside. In this plan the beach would be exclusive, just like in the other affluent suburbs on the coast. Directly after the revolution this idea shifted. In the socialists’ concept for the beach, it would be an asset for all.

Infrastructure
The beaches of Alamar are well connected by an oversized infrastructure that seems like a ring road surrounding undefined spaces. The infrastructure was built in the pre-revolutionary era, for the villas that were supposed to fill in the first two areas in the masterplan. However, these areas are remained unbuilt. We can only speculate about the reasons for keeping these attractive plots vacant. Was it because of the location being in the hurricane-risk and flooding zone? Did the builders stumble on natural difficulties? Was the area meant for the extension of sports facilities? Or something completely else?

Oil exploitation
Another speculation is the presence of oil in the area, and its possible rendability. When passing the unbuilt green stretches of undefined space from the beach, you may encounter some strange structures or storage spaces, most of them rusting away. These are the remnants of a short lived oil extraction prospect. Off shore the Cubans have been more lucky, as some oil fields have been found in territorial waters. Currently Cuba is trying to secure foreign direct investment to make extraction financially feasible.
01_ El Golfito
El Golfito is a restaurant at the utmost west corner of the Alamar coast, facing the bay of Cojímar. It was the first restaurant built by the state in Habana del Este after the revolution and it’s still state owned. Now it’s one of the main leisure attractions for Alamar locals. It is a curious place with loud typical reggaeton music and even during weekdays you can find locals here, grilling or just taking a beer. Nowadays it is still state owned and in a medium state of repair. However, the locals are very kind and knowledgeable. Inside there is a hand built wall made completely from coral rock.

02_ Piscina Gigante
It was promised to be an entire stretch of pools filtering the water along the coast, but eventually just one was built. It used to be a very popular pool during the eighties, attracting many people from miles around. However, when the Special Period started maintenance fell short. In the end a big storm destroyed the pool, which is now decaying and nothing happens. In the future, this pool might just be a new attraction point for the locals, since it is still very much rooted in their memory.

03_ Playita de los Russos
During the Cold War and the Cuban missile crisis, a lot of US Marine ships were present in front of the north coast of Cuba. The Cuban army and USSR troops defended the coastline between Havana and Matanzas by digging defensive trenches and building bunkers on the beaches. Remnants of these defenses can be found on the Playita de los Russos, the beach on the extension of the important street Avenida de los Cocos. The decaying bunkers and walls give the beach a historical and estranging feeling.

04_ Academia de las FAR Gral. Máximo Gómez
The concentration of buildings to the east of District X is the ‘Academia de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias General Máximo Gómez’, which is the senior service school and was founded in July of 1963. During the 1980’s the school that provides advanced officer training for middle to upper ranking MINFAR (Ministry of Defense) officers provided possibilities for some Cubans to become part of the high command and general staff.

05_ Petita Playita Bacuranao
Immediately east from Alamar, Bacuranao beach is only 12 kilometers away from the centre of Havana. It is the first of the Playas del Este. Mainly visited by Cubans, Bacuranao Beach is located on a small bay, its sand is a bit coarse and there are 30 cabins available for renting.
Meeting Locals

Usergroups
The people you will probably meet at the beach, if any, are local Alamar citizens. Some, like the retired, will visit the shore during the day to catch a fresh breath or take a swim, others will be seen fishing, some kids might be playing around or in the water.

Meetingplace
It turns out that the ruins of the bunkers on the beachfront are not completely out of use. Several sources tell that the gay community in Alamar is a frequent visitor of these places. Although police raids in the summer intensify, consequences are only incidentally grave and the ongoings are more or less allowed.

Time to visit the beach
Of course you are free to visit the beach any time. But if you ask the locals, at the end of the afternoon is the best time. The people who return from a hard day’s work are often seen to relax the last few hours of the day at the beach. Others escape the heat of Alamar in the early afternoon, cooling down at the seaside.

Dangers and Concerns

Puente Cojimar and local crime
Between 1993 and 1994, a bridge was built linking Alamar and Cojimar. It is categorized as high risk zone of danger for the population: in just three years more than 60 murders have occurred in this place. Most victims are young people returning to their homes in Alamar after going to the disco La Costa nightclub. They go there every weekend with hundreds of them, because the entrance to the site only costs 20 pesos national currency (CUP).

The sad thing about this is that the police and those responsible for ensuring order do not deny this information but do nothing to improve this situation.

Dangerous water: E-coli bacteria
A problem not so well known, or minimized by the citizens of Alamar, is the risk of getting sick if swimming in the sea. This piece of coast contains a high percentage of e-coli bacteria, and is one of the spots that is part of Havana’s bigger water problem. Levels of sewage organic and inorganic pollution are high on the few highly populated and industrialized stretches of coast, of which Alamar is one. This has caused the diversity of coral, sponges and gorgonians to decline severely.
Chapter VII: Music & Culture of Alamar

Culture in Cuba is a colorful picture of different and various aspects deriving from the history of the island and of its society. The Cuban population has inherited, due to the complex history of invasions and colonies, values from African, European and Latin American culture. After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, culture in Cuba has become one of the pillars of Castro’s politics and a tool for the organization and shaping of the society.

History and Organization of Culture in Cuba

The organization of the cultural program and institutions in Cuba has been ruled by the government since 1959, the year of the Cuban Revolution and the settlement of Fidel Castro as the head of the government. The term “Cuban Revolution” not only points to this moment in the fifties, but is also meant to define an ongoing process of building and shaping society. Society and culture have been deeply influenced by the continuous attempt of building an egalitarian society based on socialist principles. Culture has had a central position in this process both for the reorganization of the educational system and for the more general cultural training of the country.

“...The worst sacrilege is the stagnation of thought...”
- Fidel Castro

Culture in Cuba is still one of the biggest investments of its political organization. In the sixties the country has gone through a spectacular process of alphabetization of the population that saw the openings of hundreds of schools and cultural institutions. This organization, extended to the whole country has made possible the development of a strong network among cities and institutions. This network includes schools, cultural centers, cinema’s, and theatres. The educational system in Cuba is a strong part of the socialist political program. The actual percentage of alphabetization is 98.8%. School in Cuba is free at any level and mandatory from 8 to 16 years old.

Besides the official cultural organization, Cuba has developed a network of informal culture, expressed in underground culture, street musicians, music, small artisans and artists.
Culture in Alamar

Being a New Town in Cuba, Alamar is shaped by characteristics deriving from both aspects. As a New Town, Alamar has developed its own culture, generally related to the young generation such as hip hop and reggae. However, it is deeply involved in the Cuban cultural context and connected to its cultural networks. As in other cities of the island, Alamar has developed a formal culture and informal culture. With the expression "formal culture", we mean the network of cultural institutions and events organized by the government with the purpose of cultural promotion and society building. Apart from this official network of cultural institutions, there is also a flourishing underground culture present in Alamar, which is not always visible to the visitors. This "informal culture" is related to music, handicraft and religion.

Formal Culture in Alamar is organized in schools, two cultural centers and a cinema, which is now unfortunately closed and in state of disrepair. The two cultural centers work as separated entities with two different perspectives. Even though they are both under government supervision, they work independently from each other for different groups of population focusing on different activities. The “Casa de la Cultura” is more focused on elders and entertainment while the “Enguayabera” addresses its activities to the younger population for leisure and educational activities.

7.3 Program of activities of the "Casa de la Cultura" in Alamar for the month of May 2016. Activities are free for every Cuban citizen (Photo Credits: A. Gentilini)

Casa de la Cultura

Alamar offers an active cultural center currently in renovation process. Also under the management of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, the center works for the promotion and the enhancement of Cuban culture. This means: to provide the citizens and the visitors with cultural spaces and services. Its activity is focused on the Cuban citizens with the aim of enforcing the sense of community more than just providing services. All events are open to the public and free. The center is functional through the whole year and offers a program of festivals, events, activities and individual cultural services. The center works on the entire cultural range of topics but organizes its activities in five main categories: music, dancing, painting, theatre and literature. The center works both on the cultural promotion among the citizens and for the individual artistic enhancement. Artists and amateurs have the possibility to show their capabilities and grow as professional artists thanks to the center’s teaching program. The center offers a monthly program of 25 / 30 activities of different nature open to the citizens. The main activities are concentrated in the weekend and they take place inside the center. On the bigger scale the center is responsible for the organization of city festivals and bigger events. Being at the center of Alamar, the Casa de la Cultura also works as the main node for the organization of cultural facilities in the immediate region. In fact, the cultural center is also responsible for the control and organization of smaller cultural facilities in other villages in the east side of Havana. Due to the difficult connections, special activities are organized in these villages on site.

El bloqueo

The expected lift of the embargo in the near future is deeply changing the attitude and the image of Cuba. New international relationships are being developed. Cuba is appearing in more and more exhibitions and events in other countries but also, the island is establishing a network of international contacts. The Casa de la Cultura has now contacts and relationships with Canada, the United States and Mexico.
Informal Culture

Arts & Crafts
The neighborhood offers small spaces such as garages, built by the inhabitants as spontaneous architectures to keep and restore cars and furniture and as workshops where products are being made and sold.
The typical photograph of a Cuban street always includes an example of the American cars from the Fifties. Due to El Bloque, this type of car is the most present one in the whole island and Alamar does not get far from this picture. However, the age of the cars and the unprosperous economical resources have necessitated their restoration. According to the locals, this practice is getting more and more widespread. Shiny newly renovated vintage American cars are visible in the Cuban streets. In Alamar, due to the lack of official workspaces or unused buildings, it is possible to see the process of renovation happening in the streets. The lack of garages and storages makes some streets of Alamar fascinating open air machine shops. It is also possible to see small artisans recycling small aluminum objects such as cans under the shadows of the typical yellow flowered trees.
At the basis of this recycling-based arts and crafts activity stands the same principle used by the sculpture artist of Alamar, Hector Pascual Gallo Portieles (see next page).

“Enguayabera, oxigen for the city of Alamar”
- R. Escobar

Youngsters finally gained a space for leisure nighttime, very much needed in Alamar, according to the local opinion, since the Fabriza offer a night music club and parties spaces.
The opening of the Fabrica has also seen the installation of a Wi-Fi spot, a guaranty for the use of this space due to the lack of Wi-Fi facilities in Alamar.

Enguayabera
Enguayabera is the new cultural centre of Alamar, and one of its most lively places. “La Fabrica de Guayaberas”, as it is called by the Cuban population, is an ex manufactory (“Fabrica”) of the typical Cuban men’s shirts (guayaberas). “Guayaberas” are linen shirts typically with decorative vertical stripes and four pockets diffused in all Latin America and in the Philippines but believed to be originally from Cuba. According to a Cuban legend its name derives from the Guayaba fruits that could be stuffed in the pockets of the land workers leaving their homes in the countryside. Although fascinating, this story does not relate much to the nowadays-modern Fabriza if not for the pictures on its walls.
Left in ruins due to the collapse of the USSR in the nineties, the building has been converted in a cultural centre by the end of 2015, thanks to an investment of 2,5 mil CUC (2,2 mil €) and six months of work. The Fabrica is managed by Artex, a Cuban society belonging to the Ministry of Culture working for the artistic and cultural promotion of the Cuban identity through a program of management, import and export of cultural Cuban services and products.
The Fabrica has been thought on the model of the successful F.A.C., the “Fabrica de Arte Cubano” in Havana.

Enguayabera offers different spaces for different cultural activities. These include four cinema halls for 40 people each, a theater with seating for 70, a bookshop, a literary café and art shops. The literary café, besides its everyday activity of music bar, sometimes hosts public readings of poems and narratives destined to become more and more present in the cultural calendar of the center.

The cultural center is meant to offer opportunities to people of all ages. Children can find space in the garden playground organized with giant toy – sculptures.
Sports
Sports have been part of the socialist political program since the triumph of the Revolution. Even though an active sport center is not present anymore in Alamar, the national sports, baseball, is played by youngsters on self-organized fields in-between the residential blocks.

Art in Cuba
Cuban posters (Cartel Cubano) can be seen on the main roads of the islands and in cities, Alamar included. The art of the poster has not only been a tool for political propaganda but it has become in Cuba a real form of art and expression of the Cuban identity. Cuban art and culture is attracting a lot of attention worldwide, due to the expected lifting of the American ban.

Religion
Religion in Cuba has been persecuted during the age of the Revolution. However, the situation has improved since the seventies and 60% of the population is now self-declared Catholic. The other religion present on the island is Santeria, a combination of Catholicism and African religions inherited by African slaves. This form of culture has been persecuted over the years and considered subversive and threatening. However, Santeria is today much more accepted in common culture. The signs of its presence are mostly visible in the houses. However, it is possible to see the remnants of the rituals in the streets and on the beach. Fruits, bones and small objects are the physical signs of a flourishing underground culture.

Hector Pascual Gallo Portieles
Hector Pascual Gallo Portieles commonly known as “el Gallo” is an artist and a collector from the neighborhood called Micro X, a.k.a. Siberia. El Gallo is an artist from the movement called Art Brut. He lives in his house in Alamar which is also his permanent (open air) museum. The house of the artist is worth the effort to reach Micro X: it is something very particular and “el Gallo” is always happy to receive new visitors.

Customs & Traditions
Cuban culture and customs are rapidly changing due to the recent political changes. New habits are shaping the social life in the cities and also their public spaces. The arrival of Wi-Fi is giving new importance to specific public spots of the city, exacerbating their urban life.

INTERESTING WEBSITES
Artist H. P. Gallo
www.artdiscover.com/es/artistas/hector-pascual-gallo-portieles-id4840

Fabrica de Arte Cubano, Havana
http://www.fac.cu

Enguayabera, Alamar
http://www.14ymedio.com/cultura/Enguayabera-nuevo-centro-cultural_5_1922257756.html

"Cartel Cubano" from the exhibition "Mira Cubal" of Cuban posters culture in Turin, 2016.
Music in Cuba

Alamar was built in the 1970’s in a super-efficient way. Large amounts of people were housed in a relatively short period, but this came with a price. The created landscape with alternating fields of grass and blocks of concrete was extremely monotonous; Alamar had no identity. Still the neighborhoods managed to create their own unique identity over the years. Music was and still is a big part of this identity. Especially the hip-hop genre, which flourished in the 1990’s, plays a big role in this. Alamar became the birthplace of a music genre which was totally new on the island which is so well known for its musical traditions.

The tradition of Cuban music as we know it nowadays originates from colonial times in which the Spanish colonists and the West-African slaves were living next to each other. These two populations were in social and economic terms totally separated from each other but both had a culture in which music was playing an important role. They both therefore introduced the music and instruments which they knew from back home.

The African slaves, working mostly on sugar cane ranches throughout the whole country, formed their own social associations which were known as ‘Cabildos’, and eventually even had their own dedicated buildings. The settlers supported these places of entertainment to avoid social tensions between them and the Africans. In these places the slaves could meet and enjoy their traditions which they used to have back home. This even continued when they were forced in 1886 to join the Roman Catholic Church. The African gods which they first worshipped with their music were replaced by Catholic saints.

Meanwhile the Spanish colonists introduced as well their own music and instruments. European classical music and flamenco were introduced with their corresponding instruments such as the piano, cello and guitar. The African Cubans were using mostly drums and hand percussion instruments such as gourds. The drums were actually banned several times during the Spanish rule which caused the slaves learning to play the European melodic instruments. A complete new musical sound developed this way which resulted in the famous musical style of the ‘son’, originating in the 19th century as a combination of Spanish verse, African vocals and drumming. It is nowadays recognized as the source of many other Cuban music genres such as Rumba, Salsa and Danzon.

The revolution had a huge impact on Cuban society and on the culture of music. Both the new government as the American embargo influenced this. International touring of musicians was for instance prohibited by Castro. The government encouraged musicians to break musically with the past, which resulted in the genre of the ‘nueva trova’. This genre was criticizing the banalities of life and encouraging the revolution at the same time. The government was even supporting musicians financially who were writing songs within this genre. This was somewhat an improvement for the struggling musicians who could barely make a living in comparison with the pre-revolutionary times of entertainment. At the same time Castro encouraged musicians to study at academies and was handing them salaries once they were graduated.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 marked the beginning of the Special Period. Paradoxically, the crisis made it possible again for musicians to tour abroad and make a living without being supported by the state. Tourism was doubling in a period of five years which introduced a new audience to Cuban music and raised interest in it again. Music from before the revolution became popular again, but now had a totally different (international) audience.

The music was mainly popular in Europe and distributed by small independent labels which wanted to share their music with the world. The Buena Vista Social Club is the most famous group from this period.

The band of the Buena Vista Social Club was named after a famous nightclub from the 1940’s. The Cuban musician Juan de Marcos Gonzalez and American guitarist Ry Cooder together formed the group in the 90’s. They recruited a group of veteran musicians, some of which even used to play in the club before the revolution. The formation of the group changed many times throughout the years but it still exists.

![Buena Vista Social Club, 1997](image)

![Enslaved people in Cuba, Walter Yeager, 1880](image)
Music in Alamar
Cuban music is not only Latin rhythms and Buena Vista Social Club songs. Still, the classical songs of Cuban music are played everywhere, in all the restaurants in Old Havana, in the streets and even in the airport. If you are not sick of listening “chan chan” by Cumpay Segundo, you will surely be at the end of your travels in Cuba.

During the nineties, Havana and especially the New Town of Alamar saw the rise of new musical genres that before were unknown. Rap and hip-hop started to spread in Havana and in the other cities of the Caribbean Island and the first place in which they appeared is Alamar. The peculiarity of this New Town that is the hometown of the Cuban hip-hop can be explained analyzing both the characteristics of the city and of the music itself.

Cuban Hip Hop
To understand the Cuban hip-hop we are forced to take a step back to describe, in a very general way, the main characteristics of hip hop music. Hip Hop is a subcultural movement that appeared during the seventies and was made especially by Afro-Americans who lived in the South Bronx, New York. This music genre became worldwide popular during the eighties and in the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become the most popular music genre in the world. The grandfather of this genre is the Jamaican-American dj kool-Herc, who discovered how to shorten the time between a musical breakdown typical of old funky music and another using two copies of the same song at the same time and switching from one to the other. Hip-hop culture spread in different artistic fields and it is mainly identified with four distinct elements: rap music (oral), Djing (aural), B-Boying (physical) and graffiti art (visual).

Rapping is one of the most important aspects of hip-hop culture; rap singers used the lyrics of the songs as a medium to express their frustrations about the living condition in the cities and about the treatment of Afro-American people in American society. This specific characteristic of being a music of protest fit well in the socio-economical panorama of Cuba in the nineties. Cuba faced a huge economic crisis that is still present in the country nowadays. The crisis, the discontent with the government and the racial differences among the inhabitants of the island were a fertile field for the birth of a local version of the hip-hop and rap music, The Cuban hip-hop.

The Cuban hip-hop is, just like its American example, a musical genre of protest. The themes that the lyrics discuss are mainly focused on a critique of Cuban government that is not able to keep the peace among the different realities that exist on the island. The lyrics spoke about the differences in behavior that police officers show when dealing with white or black people in Cuba, how the local tough guys behave, or that Afro-Cuban people are more likely to be involved in criminal activities.

During the nineties and especially from 1995 on, a hip-hop festival was founded in Alamar which was the most important representation of the Cuban hip-hop on the island. From its beginning, this festival increased in popularity until it consecrated hip-hop music as part of the Cuban culture. Despite the popularity that hip-hop has gained nowadays, in the beginning it was not seen as a liberal expression of the people but as something that could really be a threat to the state. However, the Cuban state never took a strong position against this music but there were some cases in which the government tried to stop the popular phenomenon. An example is what happened to the ‘rapero’ Silvio Rodriguez, who was criticized for his lyrics in the early nineties and sent to fishing on a boat for six months by the government.
Nowadays the hip-hop is accepted by the government and seen as part of the state-culture. The government even founded a Cuban Rap agency: an industry with the specific aim to promote Cuban rap and to create the possibility for Cuban artists to have recording contracts and radio exposure. The change of perception of Cuban rap and its acceptance occurred because rap lyrics changed over the years; they are not focused any more on a dissent against the politicians and they are less provocative against the Cuban regime in general. The new lyrics of the Cuban Hip-Hop are more similar to the ones of the American commercial hip-hop.

Alamar, la ciudad de l’Hip-hop

Alamar provided the perfect soil for the growth of this new musical genre. Alamar is very near to the coast and the entire city has uninhibited access to the ocean. Different from the city of Havana, it does not have all the infrastructures that can influence the reception of radio signals. For this reason Alamar is one of the places in Cuba that receives the biggest number of radio and television channels from the US. This characteristic gave the possibility to the people of the town to have access to the hip-hop culture from the United States and learn from them.

Alamar is a city where people live but don’t work; it can be considered a dormitory town. The people in the town do not have all the attractions that are present in the center of Havana or neighborhoods like Vedado. Young people are used to meet in the street to play their music and in other informal places such as houses and non-professional recording studios. The composition of the housing blocks is also particular: they are a ‘screen’ for the musicians. The rappers use the green spaces in-between the buildings as a stage to perform without being seen from the street. For this reason it is difficult to identify the places of hip-hop in Alamar. The singers usually use the streets as their stage; they take their sounds system and they play directly on the spot.

Since the beginning of Cuban Rap there was an interest in it, also from people who are not from Cuba. Daniel Lavin, an American film maker made a short movie about the history of Cuban rap in Alamar called “La ciudad de l’Hip-Hop”. He interviewed the firsts Alamar rap groups such as “Doble Filo” and “RCA”, a rapper crazy of Alamar. Another movie about the rap scene in Alamar and in Havana as well is “East of Havana” from director Jauretsi Saizarbitoria.
Chapter VIII: Work & Economy in Alamar

Historic background
During the 1950s Cuba was one of the wealthiest countries of Latin America. Its economy was almost exclusively based on the production and export of sugar. Main trading partner was the US, who bought the bulk of its sugar and had many companies operating on its territory. Another important sector was tourism. Many rich US citizens spent holidays on the island because of the nice weather, its attractions and its vicinity. Despite the good economic figures most Cubans were living in a condition of poverty. Inequality and unemployment were high during this period.

In 1959 the Cuban Revolution took place. Fidel Castro defeated the US supported government of Fulgencio Batista and established a Socialist state with a centralized planned economy. Soon after the revolution Castro eliminated private property and he nationalised foreign and national businesses. Also US companies, who controlled most Cuban resources were nationalized. This lead to a tense diplomatic relation between the two countries and eventually to the embargo of Cuba’s economy in 1960. Between 1960 and 1989 the Soviet Union became Cuba’s major economic partner.

Trade took place at advantageous prices. Cuba’s economy was in good shape and the quality of life was relatively high. In 1989 when the Soviet block collapsed, Cuba fell into a period of severe economic crisis known as the Special Period. During the first years of this crisis Cuba lost 35% of it’s GDP, causing a dramatic drop of quality of life. To counter the crisis the government partly allowed tourism, foreign investments, and in 1993 partly legalized self-employment. Cuba has not yet recovered completely from the crisis.

In 2008 Raúl Castro succeeded his brother Fidel. Compared to his brother, Raúl is less strict and more open to change. In 2011 he introduced a first set of economic reforms which included the possibility to buy and sell property and a further liberalization of jobs. For the future the Cuban government has the intention to slowly introduce more reforms.

Cuba’s economy now
Nowadays Cuba’s most important economic sector is tourism. During the 90s this sector surpassed the sugar industry which historically was the most profitable one. Because of the recent opening of Cuba to the world, the amount of tourists in the coming years is expected to increase, making it even more important. Beside tourism, mining is an important economic sector. Cuba has one of the world’s biggest deposits of nickel which is sold to Canada and China. Further, cobalt and petroleum are extracted. Recently the government has started a program to explore new petroleum deposits in the sea.

A more recent industry which is gaining importance is the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry. Among the products that are sold worldwide are vaccines against various viral and bacterial pathogens.

Cuba’s primary sector produces mostly sugar, tobacco, coffee, rice, potato, beans and livestock. Some fine products are exported abroad like tobacco products and alcohol. The food sector is not able to satisfy national necessities resulting in 70 to 80% foreign import. Alamar in this perspective is an exception, because it is growing all its own green vegetables.
Residents of Alamar

“I am living in Alamar and studying in the policlinico of Alamar to become a dentist. It is nice to live here. Sometimes we go to the beach and have a dive in the sea. But the public transport is miserible, it is too busy. Another thing about our city, look around you, there are always people on the streets. All streets are equal and, except for the roads of the busses, people can walk everywhere! That is nice!”

Interview with a dentist student buying sweets from a street seller

Alamar - a sleeping city?

As mentioned before, Alamar has the function of a residential area. On the topic of work and economy, you would think that there is not much going on in Alamar. Nothing is less true.

In the past the main goal of building in Alamar was to provide equal housing for everybody. There was no budget for anything else, so parks, recreational areas or shops were not created at that time. But, walking through Alamar, you will see a lot of people on the streets. They created their own shops and places where they are able to meet one another. These shops can be found everywhere along the street. The street is the meeting space. While the big green open space in the middle of Alamar (clearly visible in the aerial view), is rather empty. It was supposed and designed to become a lively green area, but it didn’t turn out like that. The center of a neighborhood is normally the most lively place, where people meet and talk. In Alamar these centers are self-created by the inhabitants.

Work in Alamar

Most of the inhabitants of Alamar work in Havana or in the city. Alongside the small self-created businesses we can also find people working in a state-company. Amongst others a textile factory, several policlinicos and a big commercial shopping centre are located in Alamar. Quotes of interviews with the inhabitants of Alamar can be found in the pink bar under the title “Residents of Alamar” at every page in this chapter. They told us their story about their work and life in Alamar. The number next to the interview can be found on the map at page 90-91 and 92. This was the place where we spoke to them.

Regulated shopping & commerce

In Alamar you can find two models of state run enterprises. One model is completely run by the state, the Centro Commercial. The buildings are well maintained and kept clean and cool. You can buy all kinds of products in these malls. From clothes, to airco’s to non-fresh food. Falcon and El Progreso are the two most important ones. The other enterprise model is the Mercado. These are also regulated by the government, but more in a facilitative way. The state owns the building and the ground but the different organoponico’s are allowed to sell their fresh products here every day.

Self-created shopping & commerce areas

Next to these bigger state centres we can find a lot of privately owned containers, the kioscos. As mentioned before, the inhabitants created their own commerce areas. They were able to do this because the government allowed them to start their own business in the Special Period. People have built containers alongside the street, but also from their home, or just from a bike they sell all kinds of products. These kioscos are everywhere, but on three spots in Alamar they are more concentrated (see map).
A tour through the lively commercial areas of Alamar

Center of Alamar
To start the commercial tour through Alamar it is advisable to go to the green “center” of Alamar. Not that you can find many shops, terraces or people here. But the open space is interesting enough to have a look. In this would-be urban center, there are no services or shops along the streets. However, next to the abandoned cinema you can find a bar, where you can have a drink and eat something on the terrace.

Residents of Alamar
Interview with a toothpaste seller
Selling toothpaste in front of the Falcon

“I do not sell this toothpaste on my own. There are also two people working in the shop and another guy on the street. We rent the shop from the state, but I am not sure how much we have to pay. My companion knows that. People know where they can find me, I sell toothpaste for a very good price. This centro commercial exists one year now and it is very popular. There are actually inhabitants from Havana coming to shop in this commercial center!”

Residents of Alamar
Interview with a seller of meat and his customers

“Every day I get my fresh meat from my supplier in Pinar del Rio. This is definitely the best spot for me in Alamar. It is very close to my home and all people know where to find me.”

One of the costumers: “It is true, he has the best meat, I don’t want the deep frozen meat from the shop anymore. I like this fresh meat.” We saw this same customer at the Falcon later that day: “Hey you again!” “Yes! I also need other stuff than meat, you know!”

Fig 8.8 Map of commercial activity in Alamar

AREAS
- “Center of Alamar”
- Commercial area I
- Commercial area II
- Centro Commercial
- Mercado

SYMBOLS
- Taxi stand
- Shopping
- Food kioscos
Residents of Alamar

"People come in the Centro commercial because they like the cleanliness and the cool air. Here you can buy all kinds of electronics, for example this air-conditioner. When you want to buy this air-conditioner, you need two years of the state salary. Than it is yours."

Interview with the electronics seller
Electronica shop in the Falcon

Fabrica de confecciones Alamar

Walking on from the center, you will pass the Fabrica de Confecciones. This factory produces ‘state clothes’ for Cuba, such as the school uniforms you see children wearing in the streets and uniforms for the workers in the state-owned hotels and restaurants in Havana Vieja. According to the director of the factory, it is one of the biggest in Cuba. Around 80 people, mostly women, are working here. A lot of them are from Alamar but there are also women from Havana. Standing outside the building, you can have a look through the windows and feel the atmosphere of the factory. It is not allowed to take pictures, but, if you ask kindly, it is possible to get a tour in the factory with the friendly manager of the Fabrica de Confesciones.

Commercial area 1

From the Fabrica you can continue the tour towards the first commercial area of Alamar, as shown on the map. Here you can find the ‘Centro Commercial’ named Falcon. This new mall opened in 2015, and is very popular because of its tidiness and the air-conditioned spaces. The mall is even so popular that, if we should believe the toothpaste seller (see interview number 3) even people from Havana come here to shop. The mall is accessible from two sides. The main shops are located upstairs and are organized along a central interior corridor. Before you can visit the shops you have to check in your bag at the reception. There are different shops like a clothing store (one for men and one for women), a perfumery, an electronica store and a supermarket. The supermarket focuses in general on pre-packaged products. Leaving the supermarket, your receipt and the content of your bag will be checked.

In front of the mall there are some small tables where you can find a watchmaker, a phone repair and a small hairdresser (interview 2). Outside the building kioscos are situated on both sides of the road. Here you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables, but also a lot of other things like CDs and pre-packaged products like in the supermarket. An overview of the different shops can be found on the map at page 74. During the day the streets are very lively. There are lots of inhabitants chatting with each other, sitting on the borders and walking on the street, buying their daily products.

Commercial area 2

Another nice place to see commerce in Alamar is the “Compleyo Commercial”. This is not a modern commercial center, but no less interesting. Entering the place, you will walk in a roofed hall, where different shops are situated, like a baker, a fishmonger and a butcher. Outside the building there is a square with some concrete benches where a lot of people are sitting in the shadow. This is a nice place to have a break and buy some street food from the kiosks around the square. But be aware, around lunch time, some kiosks might be closed.

If you look behind the kiosk, you see a vegetable market, ‘Mercado Agropucario’. Here are different kiosks, and there is a bar where you can drink something.

Organoponico’s

Although the organoponico’s will comprehensively be explained in the next chapter, this subject is also important from an economic perspective. For example, the largest organoponico’s of Alamar create 400 tons of food per year. This food is for the citizens of Alamar, but also for the restaurants in Havana. You can only enter this organoponico’s by permission. This is because the land of the organoponico’s is owned by the state. The organoponico’s are a prominent phenomenon of Alamar and hundreds of mostly elderly residents work here. To attract new and younger personal, the owners of the main organoponico Vivero developed different benefits such as less work time, free kindergarten and free manicure.
Historical background
The transformation of Cuban agriculture started in 1959, the year when the Cuban revolution achieved its victory. With the Agricultural Reform Law, a new social and economic era concerning agriculture began. This successful move made agricultural industry the largest sector in Cuban economy in the 80s. In the following 20 years, Cuban agriculture went through very different periods that changed completely its organization and culminated in urban organic agriculture.

The first period, called the Green Revolution, took place from 1984 to 1991. During the Cold War, Cuban economy was dependent on the aid and funds of the Soviet Union that had productivity as the main goal. High productivity was planned for extensive export and this grew a national dependence on the imported chemicals. Moreover, still about 50 percent of the food was imported, hybrid seeds were used, and heavy machinery and oil were essential.

The second period started with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Cuba faced a severe crisis that Fidel Castro euphemistically called "The Special Period". Foreign trade dropped drastically, streets were emptied of cars and tractors were idle in the fields. Cattle, hogs and goats died because the antibiotics they were dependent on were unavailable. Food scarcity became acute, and the calorie intake per capita fell from 2900 a day in 1989 to 1800 calories in 1995. As the Cuban people were losing weight and suffered from hunger, cats disappeared from the streets in Havana, destined for dinner. Cubans survived drinking sugared water, and eating anything they could, including pets and the animals in the Havana Zoo.
Proving that necessity is the mother of invention people found new alternative ways of feeding themselves. Without government direction people spontaneously started growing their own food wherever they could. Farmers, scientists and planners developed alternative agricultural technologies to battle insects and diseases, to compensate for the missing chemicals and other imported products. Land was switched from monoculture for export to diverse food production aiming at self-sufficiency. During the last twenty years, Cuba has developed one of the most successful examples of urban agriculture in the world. Havana, with a population of over two million people, has played a prominent role in the evolution of this type of organic urban agriculture. In the ciyu, urban farms supply 90 percent or more of all the fresh vegetables consumed. Inside the city edges the neighbourhood of Alamar stands out due to its impressive amount of food production initiatives.

**Havana today**

In Havana and in particular in Alamar there is special emphasis on production without external inputs (as these were not available and still today are rare), which resulted in highly effective organic systems. In the beginning many new producers had no experience in the production of vegetables on small plots. While urban residents built community gardens to meet their own immediate needs, the government undertook a sweeping national agrarian reform program. Producer were put in connection, were offered training and were distributed seeds and tools. The large, Soviet-model state farms were broken into smaller, farmer-run cooperatives. The state started to set up an infrastructure of organic compost and organic pest and disease control centers to help farmers make the transition away from chemicals. To give farmers incentives to grow produce for the domestic market, the government allowed the creation of farmers’ markets in the cities, a break from the formerly state-dominated food system. As a result, urban agriculture grew dramatically. It is currently estimated that there are at least 350,000 urban farmers who cultivate more than 70,000 hectares in the country. While 4,000 tons of vegetables were harvested in Cuban cities in 1994, the Ministry of Agriculture reported that during the first 3 months of 2009 the total harvest of vegetables exceeded 400,000 tons; this is what contributes greatly to food self-sufficiency of Cuba. Havana provides an example of a systematic approach to rethinking urban landscapes for productive means: food production infrastructure was dug into the existing city fabric, with interventions that ranged in size from backyard gardens, to large peri-urban farms. This combination of top-down state support and bottom-up citizen participation has proven to be wildly successful. Perhaps, most significantly, daily caloric intake is back to its 1989 level and, in a sign of restored prosperity, some Cubans are beginning to worry about obesity. And all of this has occurred using just a fraction of the chemicals that agriculture in the “developed” world depends on.

**Three types of food productive spaces**

Urban agriculture in Havana and in particular in Alamar occurs at a range of different scales, from the balcony garden to the multi hectare fields. Many of these gardens have emerged somewhat opportunistically on vacant lots within the city, exploiting usufruct rights (free land provided by the government) to seize available space. Alamar is maybe the best example of a self sufficient foodproduction neighborhood. Due to its detachment from the main city of Havana, Alamar greatly suffered from food shortage during the special period. Its position behind the green belt of the capital, on its outskirts, signified also a large amount of space and soil available. A series of great interventions was planned in Alamar: hospitals, public buildings and spaces were planned, but never realized. Many of these interventions were not realized due to the lack of means, leaving huge blanks in the urban fabric, the perfect place for an agricultural appropriation. Due to this specific character Alamar presents some of the greatest and most interesting examples of food production. Before listing the must-see spots it might be handy to clarify which are the three main types of food productive space, that differ in scale and reach of the products.
Patios
These are small, private productive spaces that can be found almost everywhere: on balconies, terraces, in small gardens and house backyards. These spaces are usually of initiative of a single person and the various products are consumed by the family or partly sold. One or two people take care of the production that usually occurs in containers or small parcels of land. Not only vegetables and fruit are produced, but also medical herbs and various plants aimed to the Santeria worship (see box on the right). According to FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, home micro-gardens, which involve more than 150,000 families, are the most important forms of family farming in Cuba. Moreover, family farming plays a key role in the maintenance of biodiversity and works with over 650 plant species, many of them endemic or typical of certain areas or agro-ecological niches.

In the first years of the crisis, almost all of the food harvested in Havana’s popular gardens went directly to the families, friends and neighbors of the producers. With the relaxation of laws governing the sale of urban produce, production increased and allowed gardeners to also make economic gains.

Huertos
They present themselves as productive spaces of a slightly larger scale, offering different fruits and vegetables aiming to feed a larger group than a single family. There are two different types of huertos: huertos privados and huertos populares. The first ones are private allotment gardens, taken care of by a single family or a group of people. The second ones are the huertos often related to schools and educational infrastructures. In Alamar, outside each of the main kindergartens, middle and even high schools there is a huerto with both a productive and educational purpose. Here kids come to learn about organic production and the different products. Meanwhile, food is produced for the school canteen. There is only one gardener taking care of all of them in the whole neighborhood.

Santería
is a syncretic religion developed in the African slave communities of the island’s 18th Century sugar plantations, adopting elements of Spanish-imposed Catholicism while maintaining the central beliefs of Africa’s natives. Its ceremonies take place in what is known as a house- temple, and are led by the Santero.

As a practice rooted within a world of oppression, Santería is shrouded in secrecy, surviving first the ruthless command of slave masters and colonial governance, and later the religious intolerance of Castro’s government.

Herbs, roots and flowers are Santería’s fundamental elements and can be used both for cure and for magical rituals. Every Santero is a competent herbalist who can cure every disease with a herbal mix. Purifying baths with a combination of plants are common practice among the believers. The most common plants used for these cleansing ceremonies are mint, sage, rue, marjoram and rosemary. Today, Santería has emerged from the shadows of a Cuban society now at liberty to practice religion, and is witnessing not only an increase of acceptance but also of popularity.

Organoponico
These are the main urban spaces for mass food production on a larger scale, able to feed the neighborhood and beyond. Here, a wide variety of products is raised in a bio-intensive manner. The most important aspect is the fact that the production is completely organic, based only on green and natural solutions for all the agricultural phases. Organoponics are the main sources of supply of fresh products for the Cuban population and, together with patios and kitchen gardens, cover about 90% of vegetable consumption of the country. The main objective of the organoponico’s is to keep the producer close to the consumer by allowing to obtain fresh and local food, eliminating intermediaries and the negative impacts of transport. Many of the organoponico’s and the more intensive huertos have their own selling points next to their fields with prices somewhere between state prices and those of the free market (Mercado Agropecuario).
Having in mind this subdivision of three categories of urban farming models, we propose you an “urban farming itinerary” in order to better understand its mechanisms and the reason of its success. Here are some of the most interesting examples, that we warmly recommend you to visit.

1 **UBPCs Vivero Alamar**

   The monotony of uniform architecture of Alamar seems to abolish any initiative and creativity, until one discovers Vivero Alamar. Surrounded on all sides by apartment buildings, Vivero Alamar is a kind of oasis, a 27 acre working farm. This is not only one of the most successful organoponico’s of the city, but also a touristic attraction. Most likely it will be easy to find someone offering you a guided tour of the cooperative since the current outreach director, Isis Maria Salcines Milla, is used to tour group of people around the organoponico.

   Founded in 1994 on a smaller 9 acre parcel of land, Vivero Alamar today is a 140 person cooperative, growing a wide range of fruits and vegetables. A patchwork of orchards, greenhouses, and rows of crops provides a harvest of green lettuces, carrots, tomatoes, culinary and medicinal herbs. The crops are all grown without the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides. Vivero Alamar, you will learn, is a completely organic operation.

   It is important to note that like most organoponico’s, it has its own selling point. Don’t miss the chance of a refreshing drink when entering the cooperative!

2 **Patio Susana**

   This patio is managed by the eclectic, original and welcoming Susana. She has been managing her own small business since 25 years now, first behind closed doors and now, since a few years, she is allowed to open it to the public. The place is literally a secret treasure of shade and colours. The love and passion this woman has for her plants will be transmitted to you as soon as you step in. Susana recreated a fresh and beautiful environment in her garden where she produces mainly medical plants and plants for religious purposes. She will explain to you which plant is used for the worship of which god according to the Santeria. She is a point of reference for the community and not only. Her patio gained in fame and people come to visit her even from abroad. Susanna recreated a unique environment, with a wooden gazebo and uses the most different containers for her plants, old cans, plastic basins and even a bathtub. This is a must/see patio during your tour of Alamar.

3 Just in front of the patio take a look at the school and its small Huerto aimed to produce lettuce and other vegetables for the school canteen.

4 **Organoponico on Avenida de los cocos**

   A smaller organoponico worth a visit. If you kindly ask the owner to let you in you will have good chances of taking a look. This organoponico is smaller in size and only 3/4 people work here. The products are sold at the entrance. This organoponico, enclosed by trees and residential buildings in the back will give you an idea of all the other smaller organoponico’s scattered in the neighborhood.
Open market

We suggest you to stop at the farmers market, the Mercado Agropecuario. The one you will visit is a rather small one, but offers daily fresh products. What better sight than stands filled with tubers, vegetables and fruits? Potatoes, yucca, taro and plantains compete with tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, carrots, onions, peppers, cucumbers, green beans and beets. And the fruits like guavas, pineapples, papayas, bananas, mangoes and lemons reign supreme. Farmers’ markets are scattered throughout the neighborhood and as you would expect, the state-run Agros are cheaper, but private markets carry the best quality produce.

What can be taken in consideration from a designer point of view?

Organoponico’s and in general urban farming, has a large impact on the community. Local residents are able to regularly buy fresh food at cheap prices, and agriculture is a source of jobs for the locals, especially woman and elderly. Slowly, the Cuban diet is changing, moving from one based on meat and rice to one that incorporates fresh fruits and vegetables. Organic farms like organoponico’s are also changing how Cubans think about food and agriculture. Farming is becoming a well-respected career and providing a greater awareness of healthy eating habits.

From an urban design perspective, Havana’s agricultural landscapes demonstrate that productivity can be infused into existing rigid urban fabric. While food security hasn’t traditionally been considered the domain of architects, landscape architects and planners, designers could be a great asset where food production has to be implemented in the urban fabric. For architects, looking for tested models addressing the issues of resource scarcity, or food security through urban farming, the Cuba’s example is an important precedent. Widely understood to be ‘one of the most successful examples of urban agriculture in the world’, it incorporates the appropriation of public space with food production. Cuba’s model – affordable, accessible, comprehensive, and de facto organic – could be particularly instructive for other nations seeking improved food security.


INTI is a research and knowledge institute which focuses on the history and regeneration of Western New Towns, with a commitment to improving the planning of present day New Towns worldwide. The research takes a wide angle approach, employing social sciences, history, design and planning as analytical and operational tools. The subjects of this research range from the informal cities in the developing world, to large scale planning in urban Asia, to the use of urban simulation in planning.

Other publications from the International New Town Institute:

**Model Town: Using Urban Simulation in New Town Planning**

**New Towns for the 21st Century: Planned versus Unplanned**

**Rising in the East: Contemporary New Towns in Asia**

**Cape Town: Densification as a Cure for a Segregated City**

**Shenzhen: From Factory of the World to World City**

Other Travel Guides from the International New Town Institute:

**the New Town travel guides Nowa Huta**
English, illustrated 120 pages, 2012

**the New Town travel guides Cergy-Pontoise**
English, illustrated 94 pages, 2016

**the New Town travel guides Milton Keynes**
English, illustrated 124 pages, 2016
Largely unknown as a tourist destination, Alamar, Cuba....

This is the fourth instalment in a series of Alternative Travel Guides initiated by the International New Town Institute. We’ve done the research so you can enjoy these undiscovered and unloved New Towns—before the rest of the world finds them!