

EL VEDADO / HAVANA (CUBA): CONSEQUENCES OF THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS WITHIN A FORMER UPPER-CLASS RESIDENTIAL QUARTER

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With 4 figures

Received 04. January 2014 · Accepted 28. July 2014

Summary: The investigation presented here pursued two targets. On the one hand, there is the documentation of the recent (2011) building condition and use of the buildings, supplemented by information about the building phases and the number of building storeys for the former classical upper-class district El Vedado in Havana/Cuba. It is considered one of the oldest (or even the oldest?) privately planned urban quarters in Latin America. On the other hand, there is the analysis of the transformation-reasons concerning the clearly different building conditions and the corresponding building uses. The article starts with brief sections about the development of El Vedado up to 1958 and its urban-geographical, historical and architectural position within the Latin American context.

Zusammenfassung: Die hier vorgestellten Untersuchungen verfolgten zwei Ziele. Zum einen ist es die Dokumentation des rezenten (2011) Gebäudezustandes und der -nutzung, ergänzt durch Angaben zum Gebäudealter (nach Epochen) und der Stockwerkzahl für das ehemalige, klassische Oberschichtviertel El Vedado in Havanna/Kuba. Es gilt als eines der ältesten (sogar das älteste?) privat geplanten Viertel dieser Art in Lateinamerika. Zum anderen ist es die Analyse der Gründe für den deutlich unterschiedlichen Gebäudezustand und die jeweilige Gebäudenutzung. Vorangestellt sind kurze Kapitel über die Entwicklung von El Vedado bis 1958 und dessen stadtgeographische, historische und urbanistische Stellung im lateinamerikanischen Kontext.

Keywords: Urban transformation, urban geography, urban history, Cuba

1 Introduction and objective of the study

Without any doubt, the old town of Havana (Centro Histórico, Habana Vieja) is the worldwide best-known urban quarter of the Cuban capital, which was recognized as a World Cultural Heritage by the UNESCO in 1982. Since 1993, urban renewal in Habana Vieja has been significantly intensified and therefore – due to its compact historical building fabric as well as its renewal strategies – it is also considered the most investigated Centro Histórico, in a transdisciplinary manner, not only within the national but also within the Latin American context; cf., i.a., LEAL SPENGLER 1998; NICKEL 1989; OHCH/DPPF 2009; RODRÍGUEZ ALOMÁ 2006; UNESCO/OHCH 2006; WIDDERICH 1997.

In addition to the Centro Histórico, there is a second urban quarter in Havana, a “magnificent Havana” (CROSAS ARMENGOL 2009), which deserves closer attention due to historical, geographical, architectural and sociological reasons, but has not yet been in the focus of scientific attention – least of all concerning the consequences of the transformation process after the revolution of 1959: El Vedado (Fig. 1).

The main objective of this investigation is the documentation of the actual situation (actual building conditions, use of buildings, age of buildings, Fig. 2–4), connected with explications and interpretations of specific spatial sectors.

This investigation pursues two main objectives. On the one hand, there is the documentation of the recent situation (actual building conditions, use of buildings, age of buildings; Figs. 2–4), connected with the necessity of explanations and interpretations. On the other hand there is the integration of the results in relation to the corresponding phases of the political transformation process since 1959. In spite of not including the “modern”, international part of El Vedado (in the surroundings of the Coppelia-Park, in the “trapezoid” between the Avenida de los Presidentes, Calle Linea, Calle de Infanta y the Malecón) with hotels, restaurants, bars, discotheques, etc., the selected spatial sector might be called representative of all the other parts of El Vedado.

Furthermore it should be indicated that there is no such publication about the El Vedado and other districts of Havana (except Habana Vieja!), based on

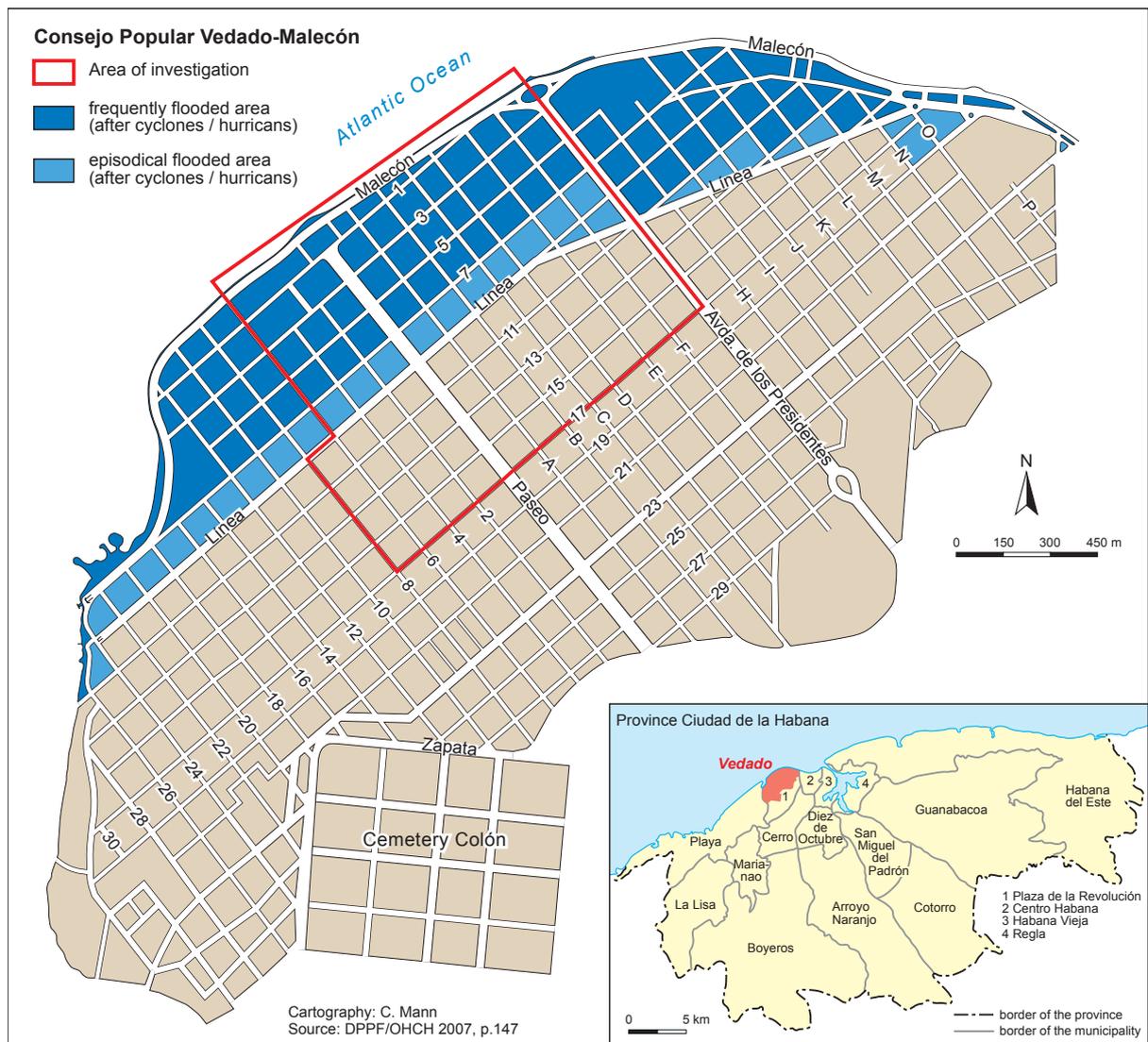


Fig. 1: Location of El Vedado/Havana and the investigation area

detailed field work, neither in the interdisciplinary nor in the international context. For this reason, the presented results cannot be comparatively discussed with those of corresponding publications.

2 Origins and development of El Vedado until 1958

El Vedado is considered a “paradigm of modern urbanism” (CROSAS ARMENGOL 2009), especially – and not only in the Latin American context – as an early example for privately planned urban districts, mainly targeted to the Havana upper-class (sect. 3).

El Vedado was generated by the allotments of several farms (*fincas*) in strict adherence to the checkerboard pattern principle (size of quadrangles: 100 x 100 m), except a part in the north of Calle Linea (Fig. 1), which was not included in this investigation, and the quadrangles divided by the main road Linea. On the 8th of April in 1859, the Havana’s office of mayor approved the parcelling-out of the farm El Carmelo, which included an area between the Avenida Paseo and the Almendares River. One year later, the allotment of the easterly neighbored farm El Vedado (from which the urban quarter’s name had been derived) up to the coastline had been carried out.

The new quarter also includes the farms Medina and Rebollo, parcelled-out in 1883 resp. in 1885

(ZARDOYA 2007, 34ff.). Overall, the number of building blocks (*manzanas*) amounts to ca. 325, excluding several border areas.

Beside the checkerboard allotment, it is remarkable that some “*manzanas*” were kept free for parks, markets, schools, churches etc. Furthermore, it seems to be surprising that the determination of the street’s broadness (8 m) as well as of the pavements (5 m on each side) was very generous in context with the building period. Exceptions were made in the cases of the main axes Paseo, G (later Avenida de los Presidentes), Linea and 23. In this context, the Calle Linea, turning from Calle D towards the southeast, was planned as a 25 m broad boulevard with a horse tramway (in 1859), a steam-driven tramway (in 1875) and an electric tramway (1911–1952) as the main link between El Vedado and the old town. This was one of the main conditions for the urban development in this district. The boulevards Paseo and G with their leafy medial strips and their function as supplier of fresh maritime air even have a width of 50 m, including the pavements. The street numbering in the western part is designed after the American example; for the streets in north-south direction in the eastern part of the quarter, capital letters were used (Fig. 1–4).

Despite the favourable transport connections towards the old town of Havana, the settlement of El Vedado started slowly. Around 1885 only some blocks, mainly in the north of Calle Linea, had been partly developed. During the first decade of the 20th century, the development carried out faster, whereas the boulevards Linea, 23, Paseo and G served as main development axes. Later the streets L and 12 were included (cf. Fig. 1 and the relatively small number of buildings from the era until 1920; Fig. 2; ZARDOYA 2007, 38ff.). Even until 1940 many allotments were unimproved. Only afterwards were the numerous vacant lots closed (Fig. 3). However, during the 1950s, ailing deteriorated old buildings from the first period were demolished and replaced by new constructions. After 1959, building activities focused mainly on the coastal line (Fig. 2).

The construction development in El Vedado was already regulated within a building code for Havana, installed in 1861 and – with several modifications – valid until 1963. This is the explanation for the high percentage of one- and two-storey buildings (Fig. 2). After 1931, resp. 1937, buildings with three and four storeys were legalised. Due to increasing demand for residential flats and at the real estate industry’s urging, buildings up to 30 m have been permitted since 1953 (ZARDOYA 2007, 43), mainly along the most

important axes (Linea, 23). After 1959/60, also sky scrapers with more than 21 storeys were built, concentrated mainly along the coast (Fig. 2).

Because of the – even in the Latin American context – invaluable cultural-historical-architectural structure, El Vedado was declared a national cultural monument in 1999. Especially the surroundings of Paseo, G, Linea, 23 and Malecón featured the maximum protection category (MORO 2007, 145, 195ff.).

3 El Vedado in the urban geographical, historical and architectural Latin American context

Concerning the model for the checkerboard principle in El Vedado different points of view, partly notional, have been made (cf. comparatively CROSAS ARMENGOL 2009). Of course, the pre-determined (at least by the *Leyes de Indias*, 1573) urban patterns of the Hispanic colonial settlements play an important role. But what about the broad axes and pavements as well as the boulevards lined with trees? In El Vedado, the influence of the El Camelo farm owner who had spent a lot of time in New York, Baltimore and Paris might have been important (CROSAS ARMENGOL 2009, 3). Therefore he knew the orthogonal system and street numbering (cf. section 2) of American cities as well as the representative boulevards in Paris, installed by Haussmann in the second half of the 19th century.

There are also such American urban checkerboard patterns in other Latin American upper-class quarters, e.g., in the plot plan for Santa Maria de la Ribera (Mexico City) that was presented in 1859, in Belgrano (Buenos Aires), in Paso de Molinos and in Pocitos (Montevideo; MERTINS 1987, 51). But with the beginning 20th century, the US-American grid pattern as a model of urban development became more important. The first and most evident example in Latin America is the urban quarter of El Prado (Barranquilla/Colombia), parcelled out in 1918 and constructed in the years after 1919 (MERTINS 2007a).

All these examples are planned upper-class quarters with splendid mansions or palaces in the former suburban belt. The emigration of upper-class population from the old parts of the towns started in the 1850s and 1860s, e.g., in Habana, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro or Salvador/Bahia. The first destination of this upper class migration concerned hill-sites with favourable climatic conditions, expressed by typical place names, e.g., Cerro (mountain) in Havana and Montevideo (BÄHR and MERTINS 1995, 111f.). At this time, the preference of the modern and popular

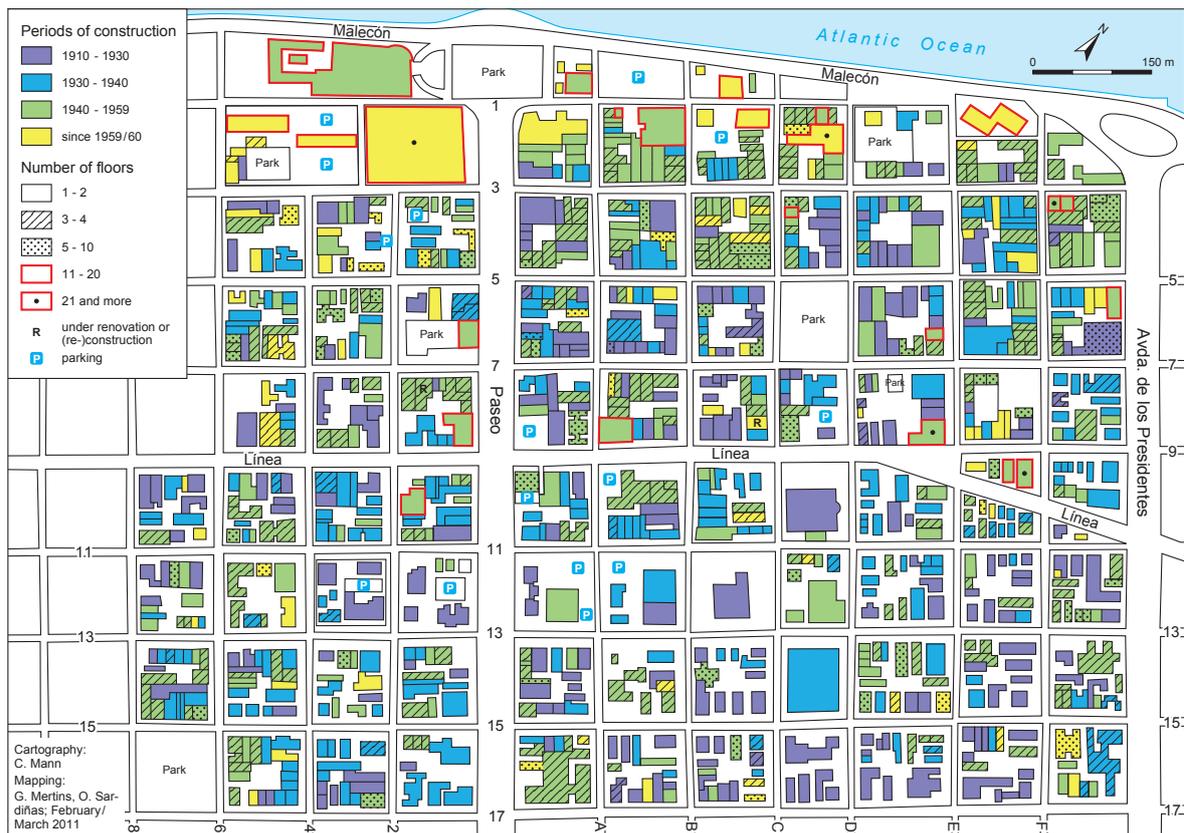


Fig. 2: El Vedado: periods of construction 2011

urban quarter Cerro in Havana might be called one of the important reasons for the slow development in El Vedado (section 2). Not until the turn of the 20th century were upper-class quarters created near neighbouring coastline, which caused the first construction boom in El Vedado.

Therefore, El Vedado might be called one of the oldest – or even the oldest – private planned upper-class quarters in Latin America.

4 Development parameters of El Vedado since 1959 and its transformation criteria

In an urban geographic point of view “transformation” is defined as the proceeding degradation of buildings up to their collapse and the increasing residential density (persons/flat resp. room), caused by the moving in of households accompanied by vertical (internal partition) and horizontal (inserted ceiling, barbacoas) subdivision of rooms, construction of additional flats in the courtyards (patios) and rooms on the roof decks (azoteas). These activities act as catalysts to accelerate the process of degradation.

Degradation and demolition in the old town of Havana (Centro Histórico) as well as in the neighbouring district of Centro Habana are very well-documented (c.f. OHCH/DPPF 2009; NICKEL 1989; UNESCO/OHCH 2006; WIDDERICH 1997). For other quarters in Havana such documentations are mostly missing or unpublished. The statement by RODRÍGUEZ ALOMÁ (2006, 143) that in Habana Vieja “two buildings collapse within three days” refers to 2003/04 and no longer applies due to considerable renovation measures. On the other hand, this is still relevant for Centro Habana and Cerro, especially in the case of cyclones.

The reasons for intense urban decay in Havana are caused by on the one hand – and according to socialist ideology – wilful neglect of bourgeois buildings, enhanced by lack of construction material and the permanent financial problems. Instead, construction has focused on newly built-up pre-fabricated housing areas since the 1960s (NICKEL 1989, Tab. 1). On the other hand, bourgeois buildings, abandoned by their owners since 1959, have been assigned to consumers, mainly to members of the revolutionary army and sympathizers of the revolution with their families. Moving in



Fig. 3: El Vedado: state of building construction

on a later date was not prevented, which meant increasing residential density. Abandoned buildings were occupied and divided into a number of flats – an approach which was tolerated as long as official interests were not concerned. The preferred urban quarters of inter-provincial migration after the revolution (1959 – ca. 1970/75) and during the economic depression (período especial, 1990–1996) were Habana Veja and Centro Habana. Therefore, the residential density increased once again, and at the same time urban decay accelerated strongly (BÄHR and MERTINS 1999).

This urban transformation only partly concerned El Vedado. Possible reasons might be the high percentage of newer dwellings, especially from the period from 1940 to 1958 and of upper-class mansions with solid urban fabric (Fig. 2, 3) and the high percentage of buildings that were occupied for official use after the revolution (Fig. 4); due to representation and demonstration reasons these buildings were carefully maintained and repairs were carried out immediately.

In El Vedado, functional transformation was much more important than urban transformation. Due to existing magnificent mansions and “palaces” with extended properties (cf. i.a. ALVAREZ-TABÍO 1989)

main parts of these were set aside for official use after 1959 (Fig. 4). Either the owners of the mansions had emigrated, mostly to the agglomeration of Miami (United States of America), or other “required” mansions were expropriated. Today, especially the quarter in the south of Calle Línea and both sides of the Avenida de los Presidentes may be called “demonstration areas for urban renewal”, revealed by daily street cleaning.

5 Empirical results of the field survey

The location of El Vedado as well as the investigation area is shown in figure 1. It refers to the Consejo Popular Vedado-Malecón¹⁾, which is part of the municipality (municipio) Plaza de la Revolución.

¹⁾ The political institution Consejo Popular (verbatim: People’s Council), established since 1992 in the Cuban Constitution, does not have administrative functions. Its tasks consist in proposing and controlling public measures for the improvement of the economic, social, cultural and habitat situation of the population.

The field mapping took place from 21 February 2011 to 4 March 2011. Concerning the cartography, a certain generalisation was necessary. Special attention was paid to building conditions and use of buildings as the most important physiognomic criteria of transformation.

5.1 Building phases

The main building phases clearly took place before 1930 and after the 1940s until the revolution (Fig. 2). The first period is exclusively characterized by single- and double-storey buildings, whereas single-storey coverage types were typical until the 1920s. This category also includes some buildings from the last two decades from the 19th century and from the early 20th century and is dominated by the Hispano-colonial style. It is noticeable that in this building phase, the bankside area stayed unimproved due to frequent flooding (Fig. 1). In this part of the city, the sea wall called Malecón was not finished until the 1950s.

The intermediate period from 1930 to 1940 refers on the one hand to the rise of three- and four-storey rental flats (see section 2), which became fully accepted during the 1950s. Thereby, El Vedado – ca. 100 years after the allotment – was nearly fully cropped. But at the same time, some old buildings had already been demolished and were replaced by modern construction. On the other hand, this building phase was characterised by exclusive upper-class mansions, mainly in the style of Cuban eclecticism, undoubtedly oriented to the American lifestyle of representation (“norteamericanización”; ALVAREZ-TABÍO 1989, 57). They are called “residencias”, and with their annexes they often occupy whole building blocks (manzana). After 1959 they were often used as embassies, ministries or other official functions (Fig. 4).

After World War Two, the construction of skyscrapers started. Even in the 1950s they reached more than 21 storeys (Fig. 2, section 3). It is the expression of increasing demand for floor space as well as El Vedado’s popularity as a centrally located urban district. At the same time, the social intermix increased because of middle-class households in the new multi-storey buildings.

After 1989, building (skyscrapers!) concentrated at the waterfront, which partly meant expensive flood prevention measures. Also, two prefabricated housing blocks were located near to large hotel complexes (Fig. 2, 4), which in this context seem to be misplaced.

5.2 Condition of buildings

It is surprising that most of the buildings (ca. 80%) are well preserved or only lightly damaged (Fig. 3). This is not at all typical for urban quarters in Cuban large towns. As main reasons may be assumed:

A high percentage of upper-class “residencias” with very good basic fabric.

The official use of many pompous mansions after 1959 (embassies, ministries, other official use), which ensured renovation and necessary repairs.

The high percentage of buildings from the 1940/50s or after 1959, which are not as damaged due to solid basic fabric or age of construction.

Buildings in bad or very bad condition mainly date from the 1930s and before. Most of them were split after 1959 and used as “ciudadelas” (section 5.3, Fig. 4). Furthermore, frequent flooding in the course of cyclones caused serious damages to buildings up to Calle 7, in extreme cases up to Calle Linea (Fig. 1).

5.3 Use of buildings

Figure 4 shows the functional transformation of El Vedado from an upper- and middle-class residential area to an urban quarter with strong mixed use.

After the emigration of former real estate owners as well as after the expropriation, the “residencias” or luxury upper-class mansions become embassies, ministries, offices for national organisations or party headquarters as well as schools and nursery schools. Often a mixed use was established, which means official functions in the ground storey and residential use on the upper storeys. A high percentage of cultural functions (opera, national ballet school, three theatres) have been preserved. International tourism was encouraged by the implementation of urban renovation and a new five-star-hotel (cf. MERTINS 2007b, 49).

Furthermore, figure 4 also reflects two other phenomena that are typical for the different urban transformation periods in Cuba and especially in Habana.

It is a matter of common knowledge: After the upper-class residential population exodus from the Latin American old towns in the 1930s/40s, these buildings were used by middle-class population and – after further division of flats – by the urban underclass. Due to their high population density as well as the strong urban decay and social anomalies these buildings are called “turgurios” (slums) (BÄHR and MERTINS 1995, 129). In Habana these quarters are

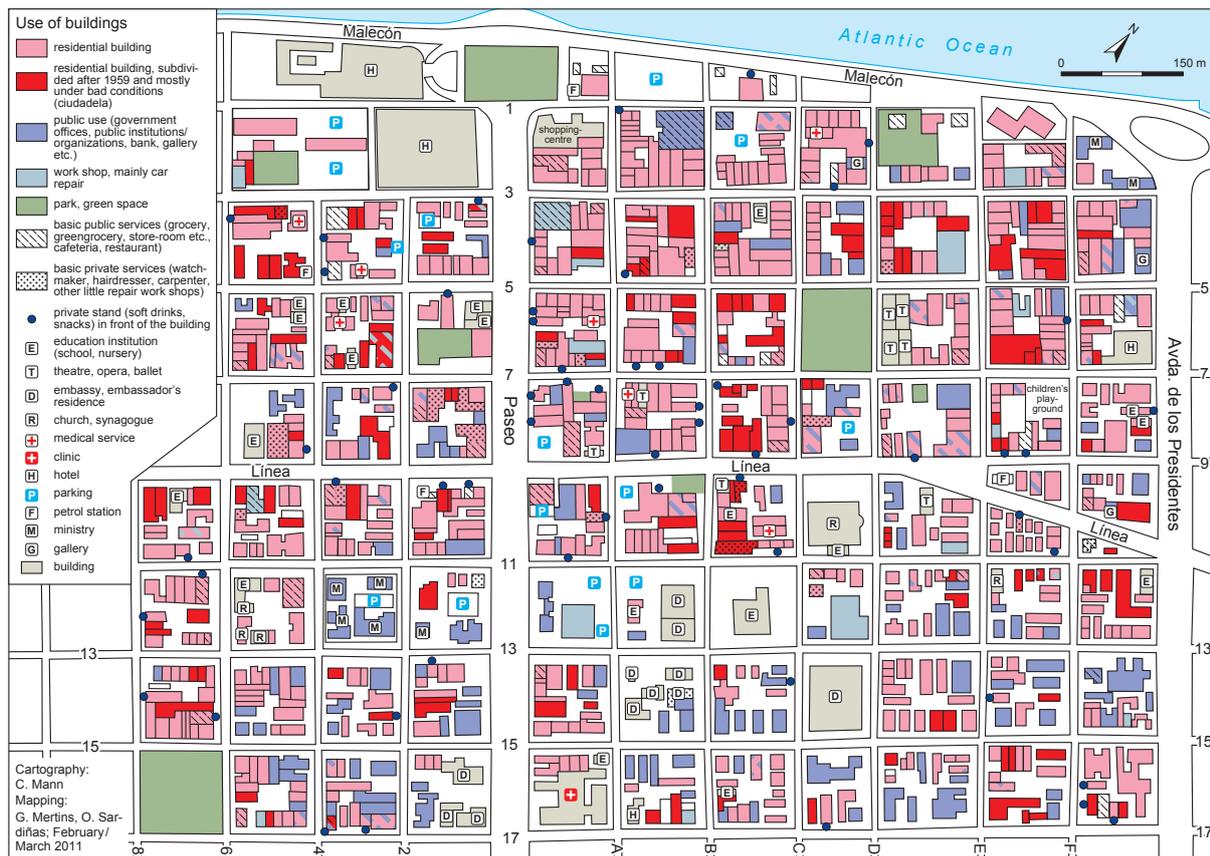


Fig. 4: El Vedado: use of buildings 2011

named “ciudadelas”²⁾. Whereas this process started in the Old Town of Habana even in the early 20th century, in El Vedado this transformation started after the revolution due to two main reasons, predated by emigration or/and expropriation:

The mansions, in some cases upper-class residences from the late 19th century (SARDIÑAS GÓMEZ 2011, 114f.), had been occupied and divided by the Revolution Army and/or their supporters. This approach was often tolerated by official authorities.

Or – and this is a new criteria! – these upper-class residential areas were divided by the local government itself to allocate these buildings to under-class households.

²⁾ From the scientific point of view, the term “ciudadela” is not correct. Generally, this means working-class quarters comparable to conventillos, callejones or vecindades in Lima, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago de Chile, Mexico City etc., and dated from the end of the 19th century/the begin of the 20th century (BÄHR and MERTINS 1995, 130f.). Such quarters can be found in Habana as “ciudadelas” dating back to the 1870s (SARDIÑAS GÓMEZ 2011, 104). For the partitions of upper-class buildings after 1959 the term “cuartería” is more exact (cuarto: room, figuratively: small single room “flat”).

In both cases further moving in caused further subdivision of the flats/rooms, which lead to enormous population density and increasing urban degradation. In 2001, the Consejo Popular Vedado-Malecón included 127 ciudadelas with 1,495 “flats”. This means an average of 12 flats per building. In 98% of the “flats”, the living room also served as kitchen, and in 63% of all cases it was also served as the bedroom the same time. Such multi-purpose rooms were occupied by an average of 3.2 persons (SARDIÑAS GÓMEZ 2011, 117). Supplementary space was created by horizontal room division (barbacoas), by additional construction of rooms on the roof (azoteas), the conversion of balconies and garages, as well by the conversion of inner courtyards (patios) into additional flats. These circumstances as well as the bad building conditions lead to precarious living conditions. Many of the ciudadelas had to be demolished. Others are still close to collapse. In addition, the quarter up to Calle Línea has been damaged by frequent floods (section. 5.2; MORO 2007, 147).

Small private takeaways (for snacks, soft-drinks, etc.) represent another new phenomenon. Already in September 1993, the government legalised some

professional groups to work for their own account (*trabajo por cuenta propia*) – to water down the strong economic depression after 1990. But afterwards, this small food-service was restricted again by not renewing the licenses and no new permits (HOFFMANN 2010, 4). Due to the permanent bad economic and supply situation and even before the VI. Party Congress (16.–19.04.2011), the extension of the private sector had been considered. As a result more and more licences, also for private foodservice had been approved. They have been created in front or in the gateway of the buildings (Fig. 4). Simple dishes (sandwiches, sausages, pastries and sweets) as well as drinks (mainly homemade fruit juices and soft drinks) are produced by the owners in their residential flats. Within the “Guidelines to the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution”, passed within the VI. Party Congress, one of the main topics is the support of private economy, mainly simple private services. Most of the start-up companies focus on foodservices and small family restaurants (PRIESS 2011). Between March 2011 and March 2013, the number of small takeaways within the survey area increased to 40-50% (Source: field survey).

6 Conclusion

The district of El Vedado represents typical urban geographic, sociological and functional structures and processes in two completely different political systems.

El Vedado is one of the oldest and was at the time one of the most “modern” upper-class residential areas in Latin America. It represents, in a “paradigmatic” way, “another” type of town (CROSAS ARMENGOL 2009), which means turning away from the “colonial-era” architectural style.

Due to its structure (size and style of buildings, basic fabric, technical infrastructure etc.), El Vedado has kept, for the most part, its exclusive position even after the political transformation: Embassies, residences of ambassadors, ministries, governmental and party institutions, partly also for international tourism. The development of this “modernized” part of El Vedado is unique in the Cuban context; there are no comparable urban districts (cf. section 1).

At the same time, El Vedado features – like in all Cuban cities – very serious indicators for urban decay as a consequence of socialist habitat ideology (*ciudadelas*), caused by splitting of buildings and flats, a lack of maintenance as well as modernisa-

tion. Frequent sea floods intensify these problems in the northern parts of El Vedado. In spite of many reports, case studies and programs, the deficiencies have not yet been corrected. A permanent lack of money as well as a lack of political measures may be named as main reasons.

Recently liberalisation in the private economy has been carried out (small gastronomy, rent of rooms). These measures help to enhance the economic situation of small business owners, but at the same time they are only a therapy of the symptoms.

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