

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

ON CONVERSION

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Abstract

The conversion of the convent of San Francisco into a school of architecture in Havana, comes out of my omnipresent desire to work with old structures, my faith in architectural education, and my love for the city in which I was born. My intention was to propose an alternative to conventional restoration and preservation. From the mutilated body of the convent, and the seed of education planted by the monks the new school sprung. The memory of the lost limbs, still present in the city, began to materialize slowly, letting the old structure breathe again.

This book is dedicated to my family.
To those who left, to those that are still
here, to those who are yet to come.
To all my teachers, my second family.
To my good friends.
To all of you in this magical place who
believe in our dreams, give them
space, and help us make them come
true.

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Site Havana

HAVANA
portus celeberrimus to:
tius indiae Occidentalis

Fig. 1 Havana circa 1622

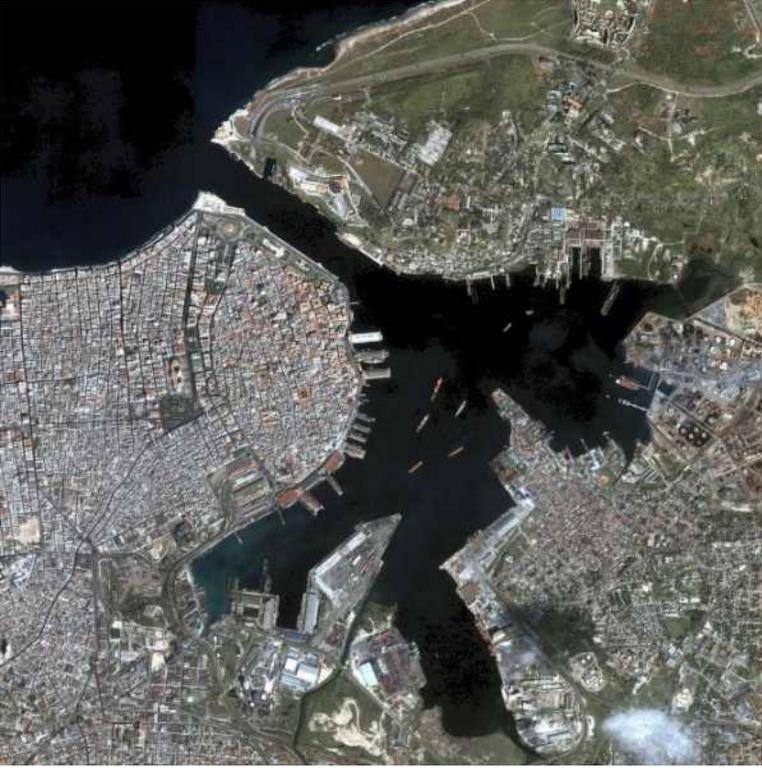


Fig. 2 Zoom into site



Fig. 3 Convent of San Francisco

Convent history

In 1574 the Franciscan order settled in the occidental part of the bay of Havana. Construction started soon, and it concluded in the first years of the 1600. The basilica tower was destroyed by a strong hurricane in 1719 and a new basilica, consecrated in 1739 substituted the previous one. The new basilica was designed as a Latin cross, with a vaulted ceiling that intersected a dome. It had 22 altars, 12 columns (one for each apostle).

The convent included A Basilica, a chapel, 3 cloisters with 111 cells for monks, a refectory, an infirmary and a library. The Franciscans imparted classes of Latin, grammar, philosophy, theology, and mathematics.

In 1762 the English army took over Havana from the Spanish crown. The troops selected the building as headquarters and barracks. An Anglican chapel and a Masonic lodge were established in the convent during the British occupation. Once the Spaniards gain control of the city the convent was closed for a long time because it was believed to be impregnated with heresy. In 1846 a powerful hurricane brought the waters of the bay against the eastern part of the building, debilitating its walls. Four years later, the dome, and the eastern part were demolished due to structural damage.

In 1901 the state bought the building and was used as the ministry of communications until the 50's. Then it became a warehouse and office spaces for the port authorities. In this period the building was severely damaged with senseless interventions (the chapel, 3rd floor of north cloister). In the 80 restorations efforts began and today it functions as a conservatory.

Introduction to Conversion

"It can not be, it has gone! They believe that we can do the same sort of work in the same spirit as our forefathers were as for good and for evil we are completely changed and we cannot do the work they did. All continuity of history means after all perpetual change, and we have changed with a vengeance, and thereby established our claim to be the continuers of history."

William Morris.

The history of buildings that we have created over thousands of years is one of constant change. Political religious and economic regimes rise and fall; buildings, more often than not, outlast civilizations. Greek and roman pagan temples became Christian churches, Christian churches became mosques, and so on. The concept of building conversion is indeed very old. Building conversion often took place without regard for history or character. The Roman amphitheatre in Lucca, for example, was simply absorbed by the urban fabric. But this conversion that I speak of is neither accidental nor pragmatic; it requires the thoughtful transmutation of the existing built form. Brunelleschi's master piece Il Duomo and Il Palazzo della Ragione by Palladio, both additions to existing buildings, are examples of successful conversions.

In the 19th century two opposing theories, concerned with old buildings, began to emerge. In France Eugene Emmanuel Viollet le Duc, developed the concept of restoration as a way to "purify" the building. He argued that he could work in the fashion of the gothic masons using new materials, so the final product was even superior in design and quality to the one that previously existed.

In England, John Ruskin and William Morris strongly opposed restoration. They accepted that must change as societies change. Both insisted that imitating past was an insult rather than a compliment to the builders of the past: every generation should build according to the needs and manners of its own age. Ruskin argued that, in an extreme case of disrepair, it might preferable to demolish an old building and replace it with an "honest" modern structure rather than attempt "false" restoration. But preservation became a romantic and historicist philosophy that was counterproductive to the conversion efforts. Fortunately conversion is becoming more popular these days. Out of necessity comes invention, and conversion schemes generate some of the most innovative and intelligent work. Saving old buildings is no longer enough. The aim is not preservation but conversion, an architectural, rather than a sentimental or historicist process of creating new forms out of old fabric.