

# LANDSCAPE SYNERGY:

## AN EXCHANGE OF CULTURE, IDEAS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### *CSLA Cuba 2007 Congress*

by Serge Poitras, in collaboration with Claude Potvin



Project presentation in Holguin.

All those present at the 2007 CSLA (Canadian Society of Landscape Architects) Congress that was held in Havana will long remember the rich exchange of “culture, ideas and opportunities” that took place between Cubans and Canadians on the subject of landscapes.

This unique event, held for the first time outside of Canada, was more than two years in the making and was organized jointly by the AAPQ (Association des architectes paysagistes du Québec) and the OALA (Ontario Association of Landscape Architects) with support from the CSLA and several Cuban partners. The congress was co-chaired by Serge Poitras, AAPQ and Jim Vafiades, OALA. Organizing a conference in a

country such as Cuba presents particular challenges. Government restrictions and logistical constraints were realities to be dealt with, but more importantly a common field of interest had to be found with the Cubans to make it possible to develop a program that would be stimulating for everyone.

The idea of holding a conference in Cuba had been contemplated for a number of years. In 2006 the CSLA finally gave the go-ahead. Our profession needs to be “exposed” to the world, but in this instance, why choose Cuba, and why Havana in particular? Cuba has an incredibly rich architectural and landscape heritage, not to mention a dynamic culture. Characterized by a highly centralized political structure, both the

#### Summary

For the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects, holding its 2007 Congress in Havana, Cuba was a “first” in terms of going beyond Canadian borders to engage in international outreach and collaboration. The event allowed for a unique appreciation of Cuba’s rich natural and cultural heritage and brought together a large group of professionals from both countries to share knowledge and ideas centred on three themes: 1) Heritage and Cultural Landscapes 2) Parks and Natural Reserves 3) Tourism and Coastal Development. The meeting proved highly successful and has since led to further collaboration and exchanges in other parts of Cuba.

Cuban economy and Cuban society are evolving and adapting to current 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. The country suffered a major economic crisis in the 1990s, and while resources continue to be limited and the need for improved urban infrastructures is great, Cuba is resolutely part of the globalization movement and an economic recovery is already taking place. The tourism industry for example presents many opportunities and challenges for Cuba. The resulting economic transformations have an impact on the environment, so sustainable planning approaches need to be adopted.

The Congress created an opportunity to understand the issues and identify new methodologies and tools required for the protection of Cuba's historic sites, and monuments as well as improving its cities, its natural habitats and living environments. What better place than Havana to make this happen? This historic port city, with its exceptional architecture and streetscapes, was declared a World Heritage Site in 1982. The old historic center of Havana has been undergoing extensive restoration under the auspices of the *Oficina del Historiador (Office of the City Historian)*, an important partner in the Congress. They have spearheaded an approach balancing architectural restoration with social and economic revitalization, through sustainable tourism development.

Another important partner was the *Unión de Arquitectos y Ingenieros de la Construcción de Cuba*, a national body made up of more than 17,000 architects, engineers and planners. Many of the Cuban speakers and participants are members.

The program encouraged a dialogue between Canadian landscape architects and Cubans centred around three themes: 1) Heritage and Cultural Landscapes; 2) Parks and Natural Reserves; and 3) Sustainable Coastal Tourism Development.

### The Plaza Del Cristo Charrette

A key activity of the Congress was the design charrette (a Beaux Arts-derived term for a short, intensive design or planning activity) held at the site of the *Plaza del Cristo*. The Plaza del Cristo is one of a network of five historic park/plazas in Old Havana.



Conference in Havana.

Professionals and students of the Masters Program in Architecture participated, as did some neighbourhood residents and youngsters who readily contributed their own ideas. The charrette offered an opportunity to create a unique space within the local historic fabric of a downtown residential neighbourhood. Although the site is in an advanced state of disrepair, it is intensively used by local residents for rest and recreation.

The objectives of the charrette were to clarify the site's heritage character, define site vocations, and develop design concepts and guidelines which the *Historiador* could use in planning future restoration work on the Plaza del Cristo.

The Plaza del Cristo charrette produced some fascinating results within the space of a few hours and proved to be very successful as a dynamic yet informal outdoor workshop. As a result it inspired the organization of a three-day charrette later in June 2007 dealing with the *Urban Landscape* in the City of Holguín.

### The Holguin Charrette

Cuban planning professionals are constantly seeking new ways to improve decision-making processes and frameworks for sustainable urban development in Cuba. *Participatory design*, a relatively unknown concept in Cuba, is a significant area of interest, and includes public participation, team workshops and charrettes.

The Holguin charrette was organized by the *Instituto de Planificación Física* and the *Canadian Urban Institute (CUI)*. The CUI

has been involved in Cuba since 1995 as part of UN Local Agenda 21– *Cuba Urban Partnerships Program* whose aim is to improve urban governance in Cuba – particularly the promotion of a participatory planning process. The workshop involved a total of 40 participants – mainly architects, planners, engineers and community representatives from the five eastern provinces of Cuba. A number of professors from the University of Havana also participated.

### Program Summary

The event kicked off with a tour of Holguín (known as the “City of Parks”) which featured a series of talks on its history, social and urban development issues. Presentations on the participatory planning process and selected projects in Canada were made by Canadian landscape architects and planners. The main subject of this charrette was the *Calixto-García Stadium* site, located near downtown Holguín, which the local city government has slated for improvements.

### Case Study:

#### Calixto García Stadium Park

The *Calixto García Stadium Park*, built in 1979, is the second most important baseball stadium in Cuba. The space surrounding this symbolic urban landmark consists mainly of a large parking lot which is underused and disorganized. A wide variety of sometimes illicit and mostly unmanaged activity often occurs here. The site has enormous potential as a public space but it lacks an appropriate site structure and connections to the surrounding city.

## Elaborating a Vision and Concepts

Five teams worked directly on the site. They created a common vision and developed potential solutions that could transform the stadium park into one of the city's emblematic public spaces. The teams created a strategy to promote a site of significant social, environmental, recreational and cultural value. Integrating diverse public functions, economic sustainability and responsiveness to community needs were key objectives of this process. A public opinion survey was also conducted in the area to gather feedback during the charrette.

The Holguin charrette was highly successful, resulting in a new perspective as well as creative solutions for a problematic and complex site. An exhibition was organized for the public to display the final results.



Work session in Holguin.

## Continuing Collaboration

The collaborative relationship initiated in Havana in 2007 continues. In 2008, a charrette was organized by the Canadian Urban Institute with the participation of a Canadian landscape architect, dealing with one of Havana's largest parks, Parque Metropolitano. This workshop focused on issues revolving around transportation, public spaces, and park services, as part of a process focused on updating the Parque Metropolitano master plan.

The Parque Rio Bayamo, located in the eastern province of Granma, was the object of another planning charrette in 2009. Two Canadians along with a

Cuban team of architects and planners took part in formulating detailed proposals for future development of a large regional park.

## Conclusion

The events described in this article provided unique opportunities for a genuine exchange of knowledge and ideas and to offer a Canadian point of view. They also gave us a chance to better understand the local context in Cuba, a country seeking to improve environmental sustainability and good practices in urban planning, development, and governance. They were also an occasion for Cuban professionals to discover different planning tools and techniques, to experiment with the charrette workshops as a participatory process and to adapt the charrette process to their own needs. In this regard the Canadian Urban Institute, through its Cuba Urban Partnerships Program, has been successful in laying the foundation for a participatory planning model specifically adapted to the Cuban context. ■

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