Chapter 4. Back to a sustainable future

The third day of the Iowa alumni study tour of Cuba took the group to Plaza Vieja in Old Havana, a wide pedestrian square and showcase for historic renovation, which is also used by schools in the neighborhood for physical education classes. There the group saw a high school phys-ed class that illustrated how teenagers everywhere seem to hate phys-ed.

Photo: Students goose-stepping (sort of) Soviet-style in Plaza Vieja

In their class, the young men and women in the square were trying to march in close-order formation with Soviet-style goose-stepping reminiscent of May Day parades in Moscow's Red Square. While the goose-stepping was at first unnerving, on closer inspection the Cuban teenagers seem to take their phys-ed class about as seriously as American teenagers, with their marching (and giggling) more half-hearted than lockstep.

Cuba's leaders may officially extol the Soviet model, but they also appear eager to pick up the pace entering world markets in the 21st century. In his discussion with the Iowa group, economist Jorge Mario Sánchez (see chapter 3) described the economic challenges facing Cuba and, in particular, its dependence on tourism, like many Caribbean countries. What makes Cuba special as a tourist destination, said Sánchez, is its pre-1960 ambiance. Even if it were financially possible, a rapid spree of hotel building and cruise ships could ruin the very attractions that bring tourists to Cuba.

The idea of making economic progress coupled with keeping what's good today was reinforced by architect Miguel Coyula, who gave the Iowa alumni group a tour of restoration activities at Plaza Vieja in Old Havana. Coyula followed the Plaza Vieja tour with a discussion of Cuban architecture and development that touched on Cuba's history stretching back to the 1700s, as well as a look ahead.

Photo: Architect Miguel Coyula leading a tour of renovations at Plaza Vieja

In Plaza Vieja, a spacious square reserved for pedestrians, the crumbling building facades on all four sides of the square were restored, as Coyula explained it, to their original design while interiors are being converted to modern apartments and offices. Many of the ground-floor properties are being rented as stores, set back from the square with covered sidewalk arcades.

If this plan for Plaza Vieja sounds like a typical mixed-use development project one might find in an American city with historic buildings, you're probably right. Coyula pointed out a requirement Alan and Sharon hardly expected to hear in socialist Cuba: the state-run corporation directing the project requires the commercial properties in the project to generate enough revenue to make the project economically self-sustaining.

Most of one side of the square at ground level was occupied by Escuela Primaria Angela Landa, an elementary school that uses the square for phys-ed classes by kids from the school, as well as a nearby secondary school -- thus the reluctant marchers described earlier. Having the school on the square, noted Coyula, was a conscious attempt to mix the local and tourist economies.

Photo: Renovated interior of a building on Plaza Vieja (M. Tank)

In the discussion that followed the tour, Coyula highlighted episodes in Cuba's history that influenced Cuba's architecture, and also its current economy. For example, Great Britain occupied Cuba briefly in the 1700s, which had little influence on Cuban architecture, but opened up trade between Cuba and Britain's colonies in North America. Coyula noted that Cuba found trade with North America more lucrative than with Spain, even though Spain was Cuba's colonial master for the next 200 years.

The state of Cuba's building stock today, said Coyula, is a result of Cuban government policies. After the revolution, the government in effect outlawed the business of housing, thus putting an end to real estate sales and rentals as they're known in the West. The government owns all property, and some 90 percent of Cubans pay no rent, but occupants are still required to maintain their homes. Maintenance is very expensive for most Cubans, Coyula said, and as a result, maintenance of homes is more the exception than the rule.

Cuba, Coyula pointed out, has no homelessness; just about every family has a roof over its head. But the country's housing stock is declining, and there are long waiting lists for vacant apartments. The problems are being exacerbated, said Coyula, by the aging of Cuba's population and migration from the rural areas to the cities.