

Cuba Historian Serves as REI Innovate Michigan Summit Keynote

By Ayleen Robainas Barcia, Office of the City Historian, Havana, Cuba

Ms. Barcia was the keynote speaker at the Third Annual REI Innovate Michigan Summit held on September 4, 2014, on the campus of Michigan State University. Ms. Barcia offered participants a rare look at economic development in Cuba and historic preservation in Havana. She was kind enough to offer the following reflections of her visit to the United States

Lansing, Michigan, may be cold in the winter, but its people's openheartedness certainly makes it one of the warmest places. Five days in that city are enough to fall in love with it, although that may be easy to say for a Cuban who was privileged to experience the last sunny days of the summer.

Soon after arrival at Detroit Metro Airport, Jennifer Bruen, REI project coordinator, was extremely kind to show me around southeast Michigan and explain various things about the urban evolution of the area, its post-industrial decline, and the need to redesign and reshape the land resources. I was able to understand, this time through real examples, what professors at the Architecture School in Havana meant by the urban sprawl phenomenon, and I received firsthand information about the complexities and conflicts which appear in the process of reshaping a city.

Staying at the MSU Kellogg Center, my room overlooked the gardens and Red Cedar River, and during breakfast I was happy to see that innovation strategies started right at the hotel where the excellent interiors and services are complemented with a gastronomic laboratory where groups of students are trained.

I was invited to join Dr. LaMore, MSU CCED director, as a guest in his Introduction to Environmental Planning class where I reencountered a couple of the students that had been in Havana. I was delighted with the questions that were to be discussed, debated, and presented by the students.

Later on in the morning, I was given a tour of the campus where I was able to appreciate the beauty of the natural landscape, the refreshing presence of the river, and the different architectural periods of construction, unified by the harmony provided by the campus architecture. I found some of the information I wanted and needed to know in the historical markers placed by the Michigan History State Department throughout the area.

That afternoon, with the guidance of Ms. Leslie Grimm, CCED research assistant, I was able to visit several Lansing neighborhoods with impressive historic wooden houses, most of them in good state of repair, at least to my eye, which is used to the dilapidated ruins in Havana. By the different sizes and design elaboration, these buildings were probably intended for different

income groups, as some were really refined mansions while others looked more humble, but all of them were equally worth preserving. Ms. Grimm also showed me many of the sororities and fraternities around the campus—something I had seen previously in movies. Later we were able to visit two heritage buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright in Okemos, a rare and exciting opportunity for me as an architect, where I took several pictures to share with Cuban Docomomo architects.

We visited other interesting places including: the historic district of north Lansing where buildings are gradually revitalized by new commercial activities and fresh ideas, a fish ladder in the river, the old train station area, a popcorn shop with a dozen flavors that you can savor for free, the magnificent and well preserved 19th-century Capitol building, the recycled Armory, and the revitalized river margins with promenades.

A radio interview awaited me as part of the afternoon activities at WKAR radio where I was able to share with the listeners some of our work in historic preservation in Havana.

That evening, I had the opportunity to tour some of Lansing's historical buildings by night and enjoyed dinner at local restaurant with an amazing variety of soups, among other tasty dishes!

The following day included a meeting with the Michigan Historic Preservation Network with headquarters in a neatly restored historic building in north Lansing. This institution has similar goals as the Office of the City Historian of Havana, with a shared belief that the restoration of buildings goes hand in hand with restoration of souls. Lansing and Havana each have to fight building demolition. I noted in Lansing they are generally vacant; whereas in Havana, the demolition of very dilapidated buildings often occurs when they are fully occupied. The main but essential difference I noted is that in Michigan the voice of the community is much stronger and seems more powerful. I was very pleased to hear how they plan to increase the advocacy at the community level and how local voices must be heard and respected by the decision makers. In that area Cuba is so far behind!

Coming from such a centralized environment where real local participation is weak, I was impressed by the capacity of stakeholders to participate and decide on the economic and financial life of the city, their ability to identify sources of funds, and loans and to develop negotiations with the private sector whether big, medium, or smaller companies. These aspects became more evident during a visit to the recently renovated Knapps art deco building in the heart of Lansing which is coming back to active life after considerable effort.

I spent part of the afternoon with the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development Faculty Board of Advisors, where there was considerable discussion on how local efforts, even small ones, can help overcome critical moments and deal with challenges in urban development and environmental management. I learned about the great value of using academic thinking to

extract concepts and theory from empirical knowledge and valuable practices that can then be useful for others. I learned about the very serious and responsible commitment of the university faculty and students in bringing good ideas, and to my Cuban surprise, these ideas don't go to the bottom drawer but instead are often implemented with good results! The community and regional networks in Michigan actually make things happen!

Thursday, September 4, was the Regional Economic Innovation Summit where I had the opportunity to learn new concepts and tools such as pop-up businesses, money smart, and crowd funding, and was impressed to see the degree of involvement of alumni networks of Michigan in supporting the economic revitalization of cities in the region with creative sustainable approaches. There are so many ideas that could be adopted in Havana and Cuba! I feel very proud to be chosen to share this opportunity.

Finally, I did my own farewell walking tour around the campus. I paid my tribute to the Sparty sculpture and took 100 photos of the Zaha Hadid star-architecture piece made to house the Broad Art Museum. It is a strong symbol for the creativity booming around the university; it is an apparently folded steel structure, changing color with sky and sun reflections, a huge symbolic origami, a good example of the cultural blending and open-mindedness and freedom one can breathe at MSU.

Lansing may be cold in the winter but I bet it looks as beautiful under the snow as it does in the summer!