



*Taschen's latest addition to the Inside series takes readers inside some of Cuba's most eclectic private and public buildings.*

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# **under the influence**

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Cuba's vast and varied history has culminated in an architectural eclecticism of extraordinary breadth.

Julio César Pérez Hernández, the author of Taschen's latest addition to the excellent Inside series, *Inside Cuba*, reveals the changing face of Cuban architecture from the 16th century when the Spanish first made Havana a regular trading post, to the later influence of the Europeans and Americans.

To protect their quickly accumulating wealth from neighbouring marauders, the Spaniards built vast walls and fortresses to divide Havana into a series of piazza and piazzettas. By 1819, however, the city had outgrown its fortified limits. The inevitable expansion was accommodated by turning country roads into calzadas (avenues) flanked by neoclassical porticos. As such, Havana became a "city of columns", according to the Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier.

During the subsequent centuries of Spanish occupation, Cuba became the repository of the grand and often romantic vision of wealthy colonists. Traders and merchants began building the palaces and mansions of their homeland. They were not bound by any aesthetic, financial or material limitations, however, and drew on resources and inspiration from all parts of Europe.

The Palacio de los Capitanes Generales is an impressive example of the eclectic architecture of Havana. This is a *palacio* of monumental dimensions, yet the proportions and combination of styles and regard for scale allow it an unexpected accessibility. Using elements of the Baroque, French, Spanish, Italian and classical styles, the palacio is primarily a coral stone façade surrounding a columned arcade and central courtyard, with two great halls on the upper level.

The Hall of Mirrors is an exercise in pure opulence with Baccarat crystal chandeliers, Sèvres porcelain, Venetian mirrors, a Baroque altar, a great many candelabrum, Spanish portraits and emblems of court lavishly displayed amidst rich drapery and a floor of Genoa marble.

Following the Cuban war of Independence, which lasted 30 years, the Hall of Mirrors set the stage for the end of Spanish occupation. In 1899 the last Spanish Governor transferred the island to the US Government, which granted Cuban independence in 1902.

Fuelled by US money and what Julio César Pérez Hernández describes as a "carnival of styles" the interiors became even more lavish, with specialists employed to decorate to an unprecedented concentration of luxury.

In keeping with this mania for decoration, the house of Condesa Revilla de Camargo was given over to 'Maison Jansen' of Paris, to be fully steeped in luxurious furnishings.

"... ornament was not a crime for the enlightened Cuban bourgeoisie," says Hernández.

Based on a classically proportioned grand hall with ceilings reminiscent of the Paris Opera, the walls display bronze and gold ironwork and the floors are Carrera marble. Every room is festooned with objects of grandeur from an inventory boasting a Guèridon table of inlaid Italian marble, Venetian torchbearers of the 19th century, and porcelains from Sèvres, Limoges and Meissen.

Casa Mendoza, the current residence of the British Ambassador to Cuba, is also in the classical style familiar to Vedado. Where Condesa Revilla de Camargo is ornate and opulent, however, Casa Mendoza is an exercise in grand restraint and Roman grandeur. The poolroom makes particularly good use of latticed woodwork to allow light to illuminate the interior without creating an outdoor space.

This characteristic is found throughout the houses of *Inside Cuba*. Colonnades, shutters, drapes and glazing create an internalised view of the courtyard or garden, which is selective but rarely panoramic. By controlling

the exterior view to framed portions, the interior space becomes the focal point of idealised beauty.

Indeed, the selected view adds an element of intrigue that neither overwhelms nor marginalises the interior's calm presence but, rather, enhances it.

The independent riches Cuba built during half a century came to an abrupt end in 1960, when Eisenhower approved 'covert actions' against the Castro regime. As the stranglehold of embargos and tourism bans progressed through the century, so did inner turmoil and revolution. And, as the empire declined, so too did the walls and furnishings.

Many of the houses that *Inside Cuba* documents are in a tentative state of decayed grandeur. Included in this catalogue of dilapidation is the rather lovely Casa del Cocodrilo, the walls of which are scarred with faded patches as objects have been removed for sale over the past 50 years. Yet, just as many objects have appeared, including the giant crocodile for which the Casa is named. Icons, paintings, furniture and the chandeliers of three centuries are displayed throughout the mansion in the higgledy-piggledy manner that is uniquely Cuban.

In 1982, Havana was declared a world heritage site. Since then many of the grand buildings and boulevards have begun restoration programs and their grandeur is slowly returning. Gianni Basso's photography captures this brief but exquisite moment in Cuba's continuing history.

*Inside Cuba* is an insightful and splendidly observed journey through the island's unique interiors.

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