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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Successes and failures of participation-in-design: Cases from Old Havana, Cuba

Arturo Valladares

*School of Urban Planning, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

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**Abstract**

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba faced a crisis that forced it to change its housing approach. Self-help building programs began to supplant the construction of mass standardized housing estates. The Community Architect Program was developed to provide design advice to self-help builders, and it expanded exponentially within a decade. By the year 2000, all municipalities across Cuba had their own Community Architect Office. While the approach of the Community Architect Program has been hailed a breakthrough in the fields of planning and architecture, the particular case of Old Havana suggests that several obstacles prevent residents from benefiting from its services. The author identifies the strengths and limitations of the approach by looking at two home renovation projects in Old Havana and the perceptions of low-income residents on the work done by community architects. This research indicates that participatory design methods should be complemented by community-based initiatives that address other aspects of the housing development process, such as access to materials, construction, and construction management.

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## 1. Introduction

The Community Architect Program of Cuba was introduced as a result of the shift in the balance of global geopolitical powers. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern Europe was deeply felt in Cuba, and the country

found itself without the capacity to import fuel and other materials needed to mass-produce its built urban environment. Consequently, the availability of housing throughout the island diminished (Scarpaci et al., 2002). The response to the housing crises of the 1990s arose from a partnership between Cuban civil society and its government (Valladares, 2013). Operated by the NGO Habitat Cuba, the Community Architect Program began providing design advice to residents seeking to improve their housing conditions. The case of the Community Architect Program presents a paradox.

*E-mail address:* [arturo.valladares@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:arturo.valladares@mail.mcgill.ca)

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This approach is perhaps the largest effort to facilitate the participation of residents in housing design in any country of the world. Habitat Cuba pioneered a design method through which residents seeking to build, renovate, or expand their homes could engage in a collaborative process. Two decades after its inception, the Community Architect Program has grown to employ more than one thousand designers across Cuba. Cuban community architects are trained to apply a sound methodology that integrates residents into the process of designing homes through the use of a sequence of role-playing games (Valladares, 2013). This method was developed by the Argentinian architect Rodolfo Livingston. The method is a product of rigorous analysis and address the ways in which architects interact with clients. One conclusion of this analysis was that architectural programs genuinely reflecting the wishes and needs of clients may only be arrived at if clients feel free and encouraged to express their ideas concerning the design of their homes. Community architects use role-playing and games throughout the design process to achieve this goal. The value of games in participatory approaches to design was noted decades ago. In his seminal work, Sanoff (1977) described role-playing as a powerful tool that facilitates the engagement of communities in decision-making processes. Hester (1984) discussed how role-playing allows people to explore and understand how they feel toward space. Brant, Messeter, and Binder (2008) recently explored the use of games in producing design schemes that reflect the wishes and needs of clients. Along these lines, community architects are expected to act as facilitators and shed the authoritarian role that characterized the practice of architecture in the 21st century. However, the participatory design approach of the Community Architect Program was developed within the highly centralized and “undemocratic” decision-making processes that prevailed in Cuba and Old Havana (Lizarralde et al., 2015). High-ranking officials envisioned the redevelopment of Old Havana into a major hub for international tourism. Such a vision implies the enactment of stringent urban regulation that limits the ability of people with low income to design and build a home that caters specifically to their needs and possibilities.

While the approach of the Community Architect Program has been hailed as a breakthrough in the fields of planning and architecture (Valladares, 2013), the extent to which its method works and how the various stakeholders involved perceive its strengths and weaknesses require attention. The particular case of Old Havana suggests that several obstacles prevent residents from benefiting fully from its services. This research suggests that participatory design methods need to be complemented by community-based initiatives dealing with other aspects of the housing development process, such as access to materials, construction, and construction management. The success of the participatory approach to housing designs employed by the community architects in Old Havana is assessed. The wide arguments on the need for the participation of its residents in the design process are discussed. The limitations to housing designs imposed by regulatory frameworks are examined, and these regulations evaluated as a product of the political environment and power-based relations. This article offers some suggestions on future directions for

participation-in-design approaches to housing in the cities in the developing world.

## 2. Methodology

This study drew on qualitative research conducted in Havana, Cuba over 2013 and 2014. Research has revolved around the following questions: What factors explain the success or failure of the program seeking to assist households in designing their homes? To what extent does the Community Architect Program allow laypeople to take control over decisions that concern the configuration of their living environments? To what degree are households in Old Havana satisfied with the services of the community architects?

The objectives of this research were as follows: (a) to document the interactions between community architects and clients during the design period of a home renovation; (b) to investigate the degree of satisfaction of households with the services of community architects; and (c) to explore the ways in which architects and households involved in a participatory design process to navigate the regulations governing the production of the built environment in Old Havana.

During fieldwork, data regarding the interventions of community architects were collected through in-depth interviews with professional designers and residents of Old Havana. Interviewees included the founding director of the Community Architect Program, the national director of the program at the time of the research, three regional directors, community architects employed throughout Havana, three academics employed at different Cuban universities, and over 60 residents of Old Havana. Interviews with officials and scholars were arranged using a “snowballing” technique. Data collection stopped when the author reached a saturation point and was no longer receiving dissimilar answers during the interviews. The Community Architect Office of Old Havana provided access to documentation related to home renovation projects along with the contact information of residents who had participated in these projects. Two projects were selected and analyzed as case studies. Data regarding the cases, the housing design policy, and the Community Architect Program were collected by using several methods. In addition to in-depth interviews, the author gathered data through observing office meetings, visually evaluating public, common, and private spaces, and analyzing documents and plans. Interviews were semi-structured. The author prepared a list of topics for discussion during the interviews and asked questions that brought them into the conversations with research participants. The collected data were analyzed through a comparison of the responses and comments given by residents and designers. As such, the author was able to understand the views of designers and residents.

## 3. Self-Help, community, and progress

In the past, people built their houses without consulting professional architects or designers (Carmon, 2002). While this situation has changed in the developed world, a large

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