Havana’s neighbors: Enchanted by the Wonder?

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On December 2014, hundreds of millions of people voted Havana as Wonder City of the Modern World. The official award will be granted this month by the Swiss Foundation New7Wonders.

But, to what extent its citizens sense their city is one of those Wonder Cities along with La Paz (Bolivia), Beirut (Lebanon), Doha (Qatar), Durban (South Africa), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and Vigan (Philippine)?

Bernard Weber, founder and chairman of the foundation that organizes such selections, highlighted that those cities were elected within a “global democratic exercise” because “represent world diversity in an urban society”.

On the other hand, Efrain Sabas, member of Havana’s Cultural Direction, and responsible of the artistic staging of the activities, had confirmed to the media that “what makes Havana worthy of the award is its own people. Its people make it delightful”.

Certainly, Sabas was referring to the human warmth, friendliness, charisma, and jolliness with which Havanians and Cubans, in general, are known.

However, we, the joyful and charismatic citizens, are the ones attempting against the city. There are people who throw empty bottles of beers out of the window of a car. We are the same people who empty a trolley full of debris in a corner of a street when no one is looking. And we

are also the sort of citizens who turn a simple art-deco façade into a disgusting rabbit cage.

Of course, regarding sense of belonging, what goes around will always come around. It is true that there are few people proud of being Havanian. What's more, there is a strong lack of empowerment of its citizens. For instance, nobody asks them for any permission to close a side of the city for a certain film production or catwalk.

Ana Tania Vargas Alfaro, member of the Provincial Center of Community Culture, stated: "The sense of belonging —taking into account all the cognitive and affective importance it has— is deeply rooted and mobilizes group activity. Besides, it is a generator of intra-group cohesion".

This Wonder City of Havana has decades-old illnesses. In plain sight, the status of streets and sidewalks are awful. The same situation can be seen in the network of aqueducts and sewers, lighting, the poor condition of housing, and the crazy schedules in which stores close, especially when people end their working hours.

Solving all these illnesses is out of people's reach. The US blockade, and lack of resources are also handicap. But it is also true that certain approaches and strategies have discouraged local development and determination.

Let's remember Havana is not only its historical center. If a certain community witnesses how much resources and work force are concentrated in their neighborhood because certain celebrated figure is visiting the place, then such neighborhood lost all of its trust in local authorities.

Nonetheless, there was a social study carried out by university professors Ana Isabel Penate Leiva, Deputy Director of the Center for Youth Studies, and Dalgis Lopez Santos, researcher at the aforementioned center, noted that all young people surveyed "wherever they live, they found common points, which shows a unity of national, and Havanian identity".

Both professors studied youngsters from five different and traditional neighborhoods: Nautico, Pogolotti, Jesus Maria, Guaicanamar, and La Vibora.

When dialoguing with a neighbor family about the award granted to Havana as Wonder City, the members of the family stated that such beauty —especially entertainment venues— was only appreciated by tourists and Cubans with high incomes. But they cannot enjoy it. So, they are not identified with those celebrating.

Havana is diverse. It is a very cosmopolitan city and it is not metaphor that saying of Havana, capital city of all Cuban people. Many people from several provinces have come and are now living here.

Havana generates most of Cuba's GDP. 20% of Cuban population live in this 0,7% of the national territory. In this small piece of land, 30% of Cuban professionals work here.

Mario Coyula, architect and great fan of Havana confirmed coworker Maylin Leganoa: "El Vedado neighborhood is deurbanizing, ruralizing, but it is a problem of migration from rural areas. It means, people living in the countryside, come here and start breeding chickens, and growing bananas".

The city's Historian Eusebio Leal was more ecumenical: "Havana (…) is today more

representative because there are people from all around the country and I don't have any problem with it. Certain social sectors are uncomfortable with the situation. They are here in need, not looking for tourism and are fully integrated to the daily routine of the city and bring a wider vision of the country".

Indeed, those living here for years —but not born in Havana— are not impressed either with the news Havana as Wonder City. Ramona Nodarse, born in Buey Arriba said "when I got here, I came from the countryside. Everything seemed clean, pretty, big…Now I don't see my apartment big. I found the neighborhood dirty. People throw the litter everywhere. I look after the city much better than some of the citizens born here".

Even though foreign visitors seem attracted by old cars, poor neighborhoods, family seats; I personally do not believe these are Havana's wonders.

Mildred, resident from La Dionisia says she is not happy with those people who "came here and take picture as if it were…I do not know. Everything is funny from the outside. You got to be here".

Passed away Coyula used to say "Past and present times converge in Havana. But I cannot think of Havana as the city from the past. I would be crazy. Cities cannot be frozen in time and Havana must change. The thing is how to change and where".

Anyhow, it seems there are enough reasons to motivate many to vote for Havana.

We cannot give for granted that nowadays, Havanians are helpful, and polite. But the truth is our behavior calls the attention of visitors.

No doubt, Swiss Bernard Weber is right when he stated "…for the first time in human history, more than half the population in our planet is living in cities, and this selection highlights the radically challenging character of our world".

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