

## THE ROYAL ROAD (CAMINO REAL) AND ITS ROLE IN ORGANISING CUBAN TERRITORY

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### **ROYAL ROADS IN CUBA**

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It is necessary to explain that the term “royal road” (“camino real”) in Cuba has different meanings: the first is any public road, because, in colonial times, it is a property of the king. Officially there were named not only in terms of property, but following their width. It was supposed that the widest were royal roads, accepting, of course, that they were the most important of public roads.

Anyway, during the 18th. Century, there were some recognised royal roads: for instance, Vuelta Abajo, to the West; Havana to the hinterland, Havana – Trinidad, Havana – Matanzas. Later, the only way officially known as Royal Road is the one along the island: from Havana to Santa Clara, and then to Santiago de Cuba. This one was the path followed by the Central Highway. But Cubans still recognise as “royal road” most of the public, almost vernacular roads from colonial times. Some traditional Cuban songs mention the “camino real”, usually as part of Cuban rich country culture.

### **Royal Roads to Havana’s hinterland**

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Havana’s port is the principal point of articulation of Cuba with the Intercontinental Royal Road. It is part of a waterfront with particular values due to its historicity, interesting ancient fortresses and also to beautiful visual effects related to its location on the west bank of an ample and spectacular harbour.

Although those conditions didn’t protect Havana against corsairs and pirates, they allowed the development of the city to supply the Spanish fleet. Cuba has never been so rich in gold and silver as Mexico and Peru, so Havana always functioned as a tertiary city, taking advantage of the privileged location of the island, named “The Key to the New World”.

Havana became the place where Spanish ships were

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a research by Enrique Fernández Figueroa: *Colonial Roads in Cuba*, 2005.

supplied and caulked. Therefore, the port was born to be used during relatively short periods, but agricultural and cattle raising development in the hinterland as well as trade growing gave the port the role it deserved.

Havana’s enrichment began in the 18th Century. Great palaces were built and the structures of civil and religious power were created in Plaza de Armas (Arms Square), and Plaza de la Catedral (Cathedral Square), showing the soft Baroque forms that constitute the essence of great part of Havana’s architecture. San Francisco’s Church and Convent, as well as Paula’s Church, the religious buildings closest to the sea, were erected in those times. A new way of life was introduced as a result of enrichment of some families. One of its first products was Alameda de Paula, a pedestrians’ walk, a small but beautiful exponent of a longing of open spaces.

That aim, during the 19th Century, was shown through the openings of new promenades and typological changes that characterise Havana’s Neo-classicism. Engravings from those times show a very active port, remembered by chroniclers as noisy and colourful.

Big warehouses were for the first time built during the 19th Century. Although such huge buildings, as San José Warehouses, closed the view to the harbour they were really interesting because showed Neo-classical dignity in iron structures for functional purposes.

First expansions followed two directions. To the West, in what became the Royal Road of Vuelta Abajo<sup>2</sup>, transformed along the years, so that’s why we can not highlight it yet as cultural route although it has been very important in tobacco history<sup>3</sup>.

Others were the so-called “calzadas” to the hinterland: in direction West, Guadalupe, the one that became Reina Street and was transformed from a vernacular road to one of the

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<sup>2</sup> As part of Cuban culture, vacation trips along the road during the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century is the theme of a novel, “Excursión a Vuelta Abajo”, by Cirilo Villaverde, best writer of colonial times.

<sup>3</sup> Anyway, it deserves further research because of its regional importance as the path of a possible tobacco route.

richest streets of Havana. To the south-west and South: Güines, Bejucal, Monte, Jesús del Monte<sup>4</sup>, Cerro, Puentes Grandes.

Each road was different in evolution and nowadays show a different heritage, contributing to Havana's diversity. It will be very interesting to analyse which ones of them can be studied as a cultural itinerary. Or may be the whole, as an anchorage in the island of the Intercontinental Royal Road. All of them had at the beginning, an economic reason: first, in terms of subsistence of Havana, even from 17th. Century. Later, as an important part of Cuban trade: tobacco and sugar. Now they are just streets, but first they were part of a cultural interchange between different social and even ethnic groups.

“During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a booming plantation economy developed in western Cuba. In the span of only few decades, Havana grew well beyond its colonial city walls, branching out several urban axes, among the most important a road running to the southwest known as La Calzada del Cerro...The calzada itself was greatly enhanced during this period with the addition of a neo-classical colonnade that ran its entire length and linked many of the mansion's porches one to the next. Commissioned as part of the Building Ordinances of 1861, the colonnade presented the passer-by with a dramatic rhythm of light and shade.”<sup>5</sup>

Calzada del Cerro is probably the most beautiful in terms of townscape, and, at the same time, it was the scene of a transcendental change in Havana's housing typologies. There were born the first vacation “villas”, built by Creole aristocrats and rich merchants as most of the first examples of Neo-classic style in Cuba. Relationship with climate, lightness and nature is the key to understand Cuban particular architecture. The new life style created a difference in Cuban culture: a romantic approach that showed a mixture of different trends.

Calzada de Bejucal is a road that was proposed to build from a small town to Havana. But the reason was that along 18th. Century San Felipe y Santiago de Bejucal, founded in 1713, had become a very important place in Havana's hinterland. It is so important to be considered as a national cultural route because of its historic importance, since the path opened for the royal road helped the construction in 1837 of the first Spanish railroad. Bejucal historic centre,

including railroad station has been proposed as a Cuban National Landmark.

### **The General Royal Road: Central Highway**

First it was a road from Havana to the hinterland, but along years it has been articulated, joining together different settlements in order to organise Cuban territory, acting as a dorsal spine that changed the first colonial territorial system. It was similar to others in the mainland: short roads from the coast to internal areas, following rivers and aborigine settlements.

Still during the 16th. Century, when there were no more gold, trade an small agricultural production was the basis of economy, so it was necessary a co-operation between settlements. At the same time, ecclesiastic authorities had to supervise the territory almost as a whole. Cuba is a long and narrow island, so that's why the main royal road was elongated from Havana to Santiago de Cuba with an extension to Baracoa<sup>6</sup> to the East and to Güane to the West.

This group of linear and connected royal roads became the so called General Royal Road<sup>7</sup> and was consolidated along the second half of the 18th. and 19th. Centuries.

The spectacular development of sugar production along 19th. and 20th. Centuries was based on railroad, so the original scheme from the coast to the inland was again implanted. But even when from an economic point of view it could be thought that the royal road lost its importance, other activities such as social, religious and, of course, trade, needed a way along the island. That's why in 1925 was decided by Cuban Government to construct a road from West to East: the Central Highway. It followed almost exactly everywhere it was possible, the pattern of the General Royal Road. That permitted diminish land expropriations<sup>8</sup> and made construction works. It has been officially opened on March 1st., in San Francisco de Paula, one of the towns along it.

Even when nowadays it is evidently narrow (20 meters) and that is why other highways were built in the second half of the 20th. Century, the Central Highway is still in use

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<sup>4</sup> Recorded as a poem by Eliseo Diego: “En la Calzada de Jesús del Monte”.

<sup>5</sup> MARIO COYULA & ISABEL RIGOL, *Along the Calzada del CERRO. Rise and fall of neoclassical Havana*, ICON, Summer 2004. World Monuments Fund, NEW York, NY.

<sup>6</sup> First villa ( 1511) founded in Cuba by Diego Velázquez, clearly following the aborigine pattern.

<sup>7</sup> ESTEBAN PICHARDO, *Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces y frases cubanas*, (Novísima edición, corregida y ampliamente anotada por Rodríguez Herrera, Esteban, Edit. La Habana, 1953. (Fondos de la Bibl. Nacional José Martí, Sala cubana)

<sup>8</sup> JUAN DE LAS CUEVAS TORAYA, *500 Años de Construcciones en Cuba*, Chavín, La Habana, 2001, p. 164.

because it connects the most important cities and towns of the country, it is in a good shape and very beautiful in terms of landscape.

The former General Royal Road has developed the most important role in creating the shape of most of the towns along its path. There is a similarity in variety among them that occupies a very important place in Cuban culture. Continuity from vernacular architecture to Neo-classic and Eclecticism, following a pattern of sloping roofs (small towns) and colonnades, is part of Cuban identity. At the same time, the Central Highway is an excellent example of authenticity because it maintains in most of it, the pattern of the ancient road.

The most important historic centres along the road are protected as Cuban National Landmarks. Also settlements, buildings and other elements significant in history. There is an area along it, the region between Havana and Matanzas where there are the most important archaeological sites, ruins and buildings related to slavery in Cuba<sup>9</sup>. Many of them are part of the cultural route, since the Royal Road was used for transportation of slaves and what they produced. It is necessary to underline the importance of slavery in Cuban culture, and the possibility of articulate its heritage to cultural routes.

## **OTHER CULTURAL ROUTES**

The keys to Cuban culture are sugar, tobacco and syncretic religion. It is impossible to imagine national identity without them, so it is very important to organise research projects of cultural routes related to those processes.

### **1 Sugar route**

From a methodological point of view, the concept of cultural route is basic to understand, protect and preserve a heritage as complex as the related to sugar production.

There are three different stages in the evolution of sugar production in Cuba: two belong to colonial times and the last to 20th. Century. It is a dynamic process expressed physically by sugar plantations, roads and railroads, sugar mills, sugar factories, towns, warehouses, ports and, of course, routes on the sea. At the same time, it created other industries, such as rum factories. Sugar production made governments to build or develop towns, even cities as

<sup>9</sup> NILSON ACOSTA, *Los sitios y patrimonios arquitectónicos de la "Ruta del esclavo" en Cuba*, Catauro, La Habana, Año 2, N° 3, 2001, p. 83

Cienfuegos and Cárdenas. And it transformed drastically the territory and culture. It must be studied in a wide scale because of its international implications.

Many of the mills and factories are protected by law, as are locomotives and other elements. The ancient Valle de los Ingenios (Sugar Mills Valley) is in the World Heritage List. Some are managed in a very interesting way, as Hershey's complex and railroad and Rum's Museum in Old Havana. But transformation of production and consequently reuse of sugar factories could damage heritage, so it deserves constant research and highlighting.

### **2 Tobacco route**

Something similar happens with tobacco production, but it will be more difficult to find or to select the physical route between plantations and factories, because these were in urban centres. Nevertheless, it must be studied and, as in the case of Sugar Route, in a wide scale because of its international implications. Protection of tobacco heritage is ample. Viñales Valley is in the World Heritage List as well as those factories which are part of Old Havana.

### **3 Coffee route**

The most important ancient coffee plantations are in the World Heritage List and intangible heritage related to French influences from Haiti are recognised<sup>10</sup>. But it is necessary to organise research programs on cultural routes.

### **4 Pilgrimage route to El Cobre**

El Cobre, Cuban sanctuary and its pilgrimage route is a very interesting case of cultural route with very important intangible elements, and an impressive landscape related to copper mines, a culture of production and mixture between races that created a particular religious fervour and the basis of many and diverse cultural manifestations such as songs, paintings and crafts. There are references to roads between Santiago de Cuba and copper mines since the beginnings of 17th. Century<sup>11</sup>.

### **5 Camajuaní Road**

This is a particular example of what could be understood as a cultural route. I would like to discuss it because of its evolution and complexity, and more, because it has been changing its path due to development along centuries. It

<sup>10</sup> La Tumba Francesa de Santiago de Cuba, one of World's Masterpieces as Intangible Heritage.

<sup>11</sup> "Memorias de la Real Sociedad Económica de La Habana". Segunda serie. Tomo III. Edit. La Habana 1847. Pp.182-4. From: ENRIQUE FERNÁNDEZ, *La historia como condicionante del territorio. El caso de Cuba*, Grafinat, Madrid, 1993, p. 99.

has become a road, even named in the 20th. Century as a highway, but at the beginning it was a group of paths opened in the forest by aborigines and later used by conquerors. The net of roads were, until 19th. Century of the vernacular type, and the more important of them, known as royal roads.

Spaniards founded a small town at the northern coast, San Juan de los Remedios (1515), the first after the seven founded by Diego Velázquez, which became the real core of a cultural route. As the rest of the villas founded during the 16th. Century, there were a better relationship with the sea than with the inland, first to trade with Mexico and after with Florida. Caibarién, a small fishermen's village, helped then to smuggling trade, but was not founded as a villa and port until 1832, but then as a necessity for sugar trade.

But Remedians, still using old paths, discovered really better lands to the South, what have once been the aborigine territory of Cubanacán, one of the most fertile valleys of the island, particularly good for sugar plantation. So they took the decision to move there. They were, at the same time, afraid of pirate attacks and that was the main reason they gave to found the new town. The informal roads from Remedios to Cubanacán became the scene of different types of moves: some of them even clandestine and others were skirmishes that lasted even when the new town, Santa Clara, was founded in 1689. The most interesting thing is that the contradiction between both groups created a myth: it was supposed that Remedios was took by the demons, so inhabitants had to move. That legend is a very important part of Cuban culture<sup>12</sup>.

Camajuaní (1879), the town after which is nowadays named the road, was part of the consolidation of it, since was developed as a place to rest and service travels. It has a particular characteristic: that the most important building that marks the foundation site is the railroad station because the site for the town is the crossing of the royal road with the railroad.

Camajuaní Road shows an interesting pattern, since it is an example of "a route that takes advantage either totally of partially of pre-existing roads used for different purposes"<sup>13</sup> in a dynamic process that changed along centuries following production and social necessities.

The historic centres of Remedios and Santa Clara have been declared as Cuban National Landmarks. There are

many elements related to the use of the route. Recently the central area of Camajuaní has been proposed as national landmark too and it is under discussion by Cuban National Landmarks Commission. The four cities and most of the fortresses and other historic buildings and archaeological sites such those related to slavery are legally protected and being studied by specialists from Cuban central region<sup>14</sup>.

Cultural routes shown in this presentation are examples of different types: According to their structural configuration: must are linear, but one of them (Camajuaní Road) is a network that became linear. According to their territorial scope<sup>15</sup> their character is national because of their significance in Cuban culture, including tangible and intangible elements. Some of them and others partially studied could be integrated to regional, continental or even intercontinental cultural routes, such as Intercontinental Royal Road.

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<sup>12</sup> FERNANDO ORTIZ, *Historia de una pelea cubana contra los demonios*, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Ideas for the drafting of an international charter on cultural routes. A fourth approach (June, 2005), p. 2

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<sup>14</sup> Arch. Ginley Durán is developing his PhD. thesis focused in Camajuaní Road as a cultural route, under the direction of the author of this presentation.

<sup>15</sup> Following CIIC, *Ideas for the Drafting of an International Charter on Cultural Routes. A Fourth Approach (June, 2005)*, p. 2

## **Resume**

Cuban identity has been conformed along time as a mixture among cultures. Different routes made possible the transformation of Cuban territory and became a net that sustained land structure along centuries.

Aborigine settlements served to create Spanish villages, but economic and territorial development was pressured by the Intercontinental Royal Road. This is due to the importance of fleet system for the development of Havana, and shows the role of the city in Iberoamerican culture. From Cuban ports, and particularly Havana's, parted new roads to the hinterland that guaranteed services and production. They were the first steps in colonisation and the basis, years after, to tobacco and sugar production.

This presentation shows the evolution of Cuban roads and their elements, focused in the net of roads as a Cultural Route. Relationship with other cultural developments will be underlined and also its current importance, values and protection as heritage.

Because of its importance it will emphasise the routes between Havana and its surroundings and also the corridor conformed by a net of Royal Roads that created a system of settlements and became the path of the Central Highway. It will be shown the importance of a research concerning other routes of the most importance, such as those related to sugar, tobacco, coffee, syncretic religions and the role of slavery.

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Fig. 1 Cuba. Map showing Central Highway.

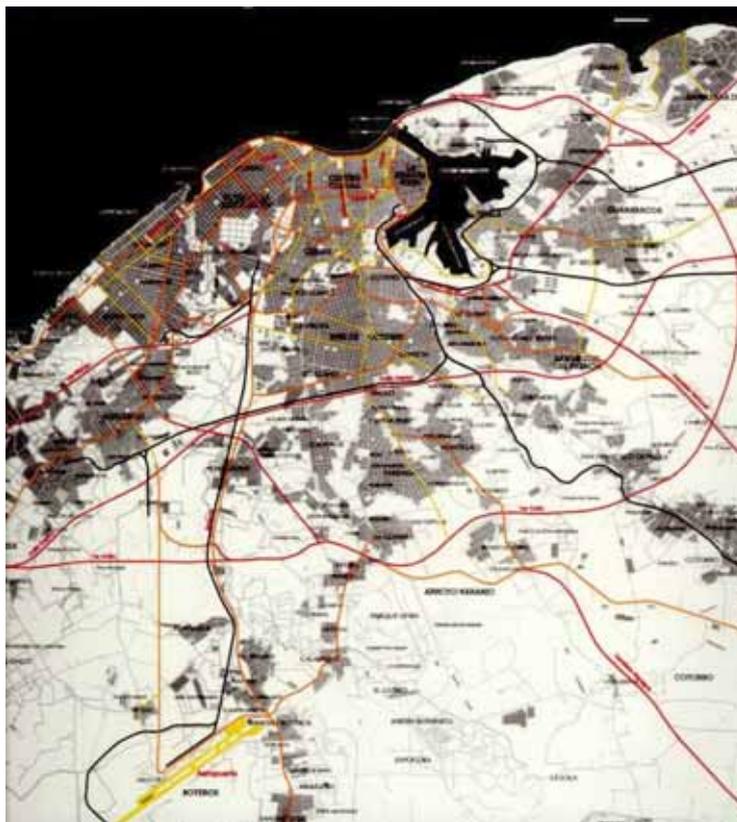


Fig. 2 Map of the city of Havana showing the roads to the hinterland.



Fig. 3 Calzada del Cerro