

Cuba's Urban Landscape Needs a Second Round of Innovation for Health

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Cuba's economy spiraled downward in the 1990s, reeling from the collapse of European socialism and a tightened US embargo. To mitigate the crash's drastic effects, measures were adopted that transformed our urban landscape, especially in large cities such as Havana, paradoxically linking the period to nascent health-promoting options. One of the most important was the introduction of bicycle lanes on city streets, paths daily ridden by people on the over one million bicycles imported to offset the nearly nonexistent public transport caused by fuel shortages. Second, urban gardens began to sprout up, involving urban dwellers in production of their own food, particularly vegetables.

Without minimizing the impact of the crisis, these two seemingly disparate phenomena meant people were getting more exercise, consuming fewer fats and carbohydrates and more fresh vegetables. People were even breathing fresher air, with fewer CO₂-belching trucks, old cars and buses on the streets and less diesel used to transport produce in from afar.

But cycling and urban gardens met opposite fates as the economy gradually recovered from its darkest period: the bicycle paths and lanes have disappeared, replaced by the old cars that are such a tourist attraction, but whose emissions threaten even the hardiest lungs. The urban gardens, on the other hand, have survived, and in many cases thrived—although I would argue they could certainly be better planned and expanded.

Why were the bicycles shelved, in favor of cars and a public transit system that has not improved all that much? My own view is subjective, but I would wager one big reason is the association in people's minds between the two-wheelers and abject poverty: cycling was something we did when we didn't have a choice. Curiously—just at a time when bicycles represent a trend in European and North American cities, recognized for the benefits of exercise they offer, even making bicycle rentals an inexpensive option^[1]—in Cuba, they are an “endangered urban artifact” of a past we would rather not remember.

They may have also suffered from policy neglect, unlike the urban gardens, which have remained a priority as the country works towards import substitution and food security. Decades after they were first introduced, the gardens are enjoying something of a renaissance, the object of renewed government emphasis. Their production is rising, as are their sales. One national authority even went so far as to say publicly that the gardens have made Havana self-sufficient in leafy green vegetables—one of the most important components of a healthy diet.


However, the flip side of this is that various specialists in the health sector report that the amounts of fruits and vegetables actually consumed by the population are far from the recommended daily allowance. The quantity and diversity are not enough; prices at farmers' markets (where much produce is still trucked in from the countryside) are too high; and what's more, many Cubans are not in the habit of eating enough vegetables. These aren't part of the

basic Cuban diet, and have not been for decades, if not centuries. A new problem being raised is that some health authorities have found traces of contamination in produce from some gardens, a situation demanding closer monitoring.

What does all this mean, and how are the two...bicycles and gardens...related in today's Havana, now also the hot spot for a record number of international visitors and tourists, and a scenario for burgeoning small businesses? How are residents in Havana and other bigger Cuban cities to be encouraged to change their diets for the better and turn once again to cycling, this time around for healthy exercise? How can such innovation become part of the necessary transformations of our capital?

I believe the answer lies in a multidisciplinary approach to city living, to gathering urban planners, health experts and inspectors, urban farmers, local government and community leaders, sports and recreation managers, schools...all to look at the problem more holistically, with health as a priority. We need to join together to change the urban landscape, into a more health-promoting environment.

We need to think about urban gardens in a broader framework: they don't simply produce fresh vegetables, but also provide cooler spaces for a city whose temperatures this year reached record highs. They also mitigate other negative impacts, such as soil compaction and population overcrowding. And correctly monitored by multidisciplinary action, their health benefits can be assured by limiting noxious agrochemicals. Renewed policy emphasis on exercise should lead us not only to using bicycles and re-establishing bicycle paths, but also to bicycle production, so that cost is not a factor when cycling comes to mind. We can learn from cities that have made cycling—along with walking—almost a way of life. The road towards health, not back to poverty.

But all these efforts, I repeat, will take multidisciplinary planning and action. In our tropical climate, we can't expect cyclists to enjoy their ride without considering the need for shade and access to drinking water along their routes. Urban gardens need to be strategically planned, to be accessible not only financially, but also physically, to communities throughout the city. The transformations already happening in our cities shouldn't happen without us...the people who live in them, the professionals who care about and for them, the ones who can initiate a proactive approach to a new kind of holistic city planning. Together, we can generate the vision and create a city that is not simply a “container of people,” but rather, thanks to its residents, a lively, livable and consciously healthy environment. 

1. Viljoen A, Bohn K, Howe J. Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes. Oxford: Architectural Press, ELSEVIER; 2005.

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Disclosures: None

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