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May/June 2006
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Cubasi!

by Robert L. Peters, FGDC

Life and design on the embargoed archipelago

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was a watershed event that bestowed on Cubans extraordinary gifts of social justice and equality, dramatic advances in public health and education, and an equitable distribution of the national wealth. It also brought unprecedented attention to the Caribbean, placed Cuba in opposition to the U.S. in the midst of the Cold War, and has unalterably changed the course of history and politics throughout the Americas.

“Limited means beget new forms, invite creation...” wrote Georges Braque, the famous French painter. His thesis that progress lies *not* in extension, but in a deeper knowledge of limitations offers an apt depiction for the lot and creative life of modern Cuba—just as necessity gives birth to invention, post-Revolutionary Cubans have had to exercise ingenuity, inventiveness and resiliency through more than four decades of ensuing marginalization and economic hardship.

Land of eternal spring

Cuba is the largest and most populous island nation in the Caribbean, with a crocodile-shaped landmass of 110,860 km² (42,800 square miles, slightly smaller than Pennsylvania), and a population of 11.3 million Spanish-speaking citizens. Situated just 150 km (90 miles) from the coast of Florida, and stretching 1,250 km (780 miles) eastward, Cuba is actually an archipelago of two large islands and 4,195 keys, islands and islets. Its coastline, natural beaches and vibrant coral reef provide a marine wonderland lying between the Atlantic to Cuba’s north, the calmer Caribbean Sea to the south and the Gulf of Mexico to the west.

When Columbus landed in Cuba in 1492 (thinking that he had found Asia) he described it as “the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen,” a view still shared by the millions of (non-U.S.) tourists who visit annually to savor the island’s languid tropical climate, remarkably varied flora and fauna,

historical heritage and, of course, exquisite beach resorts and all things aquatic. Although Cuba trades with almost every nation on earth (except the U.S.) and is famous the world over for its revolutionary and egalitarian ideals (it has been sending medical, educational and nutritional aid to under-privileged nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia since the 1960s); its venerable export of sugar, rum, coffee, cocoa and cigars (aboriginals in Cuba were already growing tobacco when Columbus arrived); its mining of copper, magnesium and nickel (Cuba has the world’s largest nickel deposits, some 34% of global reserves); its advanced biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry (monoclonal antibodies, therapeutic vaccines); its rich musical legacy (Habanera, Guajira, Mambo, Timba, Latin Jazz, Son—think *Buena Vista Social Club* for the latter); its vibrant arts culture; its ex-patriot baseball superstars; as well as today’s hedonic-health-and-eco tourism; the country is little known to the average citizen of the United States, a result of the sustained embargo that Washington has imposed since 1962.

Beleaguered history

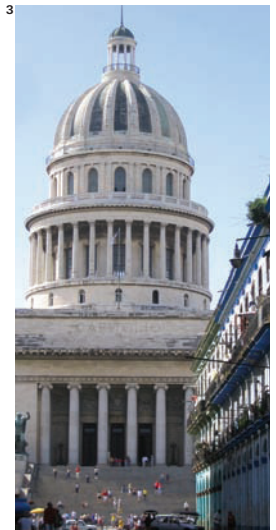
Cuba’s Amerindian population came under control of the Spanish Crown following the imperialist expedition of Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, who sailed over from nearby Hispaniola in 1512. The Spanish conquistadors brought “the heathens” a brutal system of forced indigenous labor, Christianity (with its promise of salvation) and widespread disease—a combination that effectively exterminated the Natives by the middle of the sixteenth century. As elsewhere in the Americas, thousands of African slaves were then “imported” as a work force for the extraction of gold and minerals, and for labor to run the massive sugar, coffee and tobacco plantations.

From the mid-sixteenth through mid-eighteenth century, Cuba was the focus of an ongoing power-struggle between Spanish traders, European monarchs and ransacking pirates.

Right: 1. Designer **Rafael Morante** (73) with his movie poster *Parallel Lives*; ICAIC, client. 2, 3, 4, 5. Havana’s **streets and façades** offer visual delights—canon repurposed as automotive barricades (for pedestrian areas), stylish signs and architecture from many eras. 6. Cuba’s **stamps** express the country’s values: protesting the U.S. genocide in Vietnam (1966), honoring Comandante Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s heroic death (1968). 7. Centro Comercial **La Puntilla** (shopping center, 2001), Osmany Torres, designer. 8. A digital illustration from the 1999 series “**Las mil caras de Eva**” (1,000 faces of Eve) by José Fresquet “Frémex.”

9. An eastward view of Havana’s famous **Hotel Nacional** and shoreline Malecón. 10. **Hotel Riviera**, practically unchanged since its pre-Revolution ownership by Mafia boss Meyer Lansky. 11, 13, 14. Habana Vieja’s **streets and squares** offer a surprising mix of Baroque buildings, 1950’s American cars and friendly Habaneros. 12. Designer **Pepe Menéndez** (40) with an unfinished painting of his great-uncle’s—Enrique García Cabrera, a famous pre-Revolution illustrator. 15, 18. Designer **José Papiol Torrent** (73) with billboard layouts (spanning several decades) produced by Editora Política, the Communist Party’s official

propaganda department. These roadside billboards appear across Cuba, commemorating the Revolution and extolling its virtues, protesting U.S. interference, and calling Cubans to greater productivity. 16. Illustrator **Ernesto Elizarán** (39) at his home/studio with a premium rum package he designed for Havana Club. 17. Illustration (detail) of rebel leaders **Fidel Castro, ‘Che’ and Camilo Cienfuegos**, René Mederos (1933–1996), illustrator; Ediciones Verde Olivo, publisher. 19. Designer **Sahily Tabares** (45) with an award citation from Salón Nacional de la Gráfica. All photographs taken by Robert L. Peters.



Cuba si!

Britain invaded Cuba in 1762 (while Spain was battling Britain and France in the Seven Years War), but traded it back to Spain in exchange for Florida the following year in the Peace of Paris treaty. By the 1820s, Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer (making the U.S. very sweet on it), a position supported by the import of ever more slaves—by 1840, there were more than 400,000 Africans on the island.

The colony's struggle for independence from Spain began in 1868, and continued through uprisings by *criollo* landowners and several failed wars. In 1892, poet, patriot and independence leader José Martí headed a successful revolution that led to the weakening of Spanish control (though he himself was killed in 1895, attaining the status of heroic martyr). In 1898 the battleship *Maine* (sent to Cuba to “protect U.S. citizens”) exploded in Havana's harbor, killing 266 U.S. sailors and triggering the “Spanish-American” war (fueled by sensationalized war fever stoked by William Randolph Hearst and the U.S. tabloid press). The Spanish claimed that the *Maine's* demise was an accident, the Americans blamed the Spanish and some Cubans accused the U.S., claiming the incident provided a “convenient pretext for intervention.” The war was over within the year, the Teller Resolution committed the U.S. to respect Cuban self-determination and the Platt Amendment (among other things) allowed the U.S. to intervene militarily in Cuba whenever they saw fit.



A Republic is born

Cuba finally became an “independent” republic in 1902, though with a series of weak, corrupt, governments highly dependent upon the U.S. (who intervened militarily in 1906, 1912 and 1917). At the turn of the century, Cuba's mono-crop sugar economy was basically a U.S. monopoly—by the 1920s, American companies

owned two-thirds of Cuba's farmland and most of its mines. Between 1919 and 1933 (Prohibition in the U.S.), tourism based on drinking, gambling and prostitution flourished in Cuba, though the following Great Depression brought plummeting commodity prices, plunged Cuba into chaos and led to devastating general strikes. In the ensuing power vacuum, sergeant Fulgencio Batista stepped in—first as the army's chief of staff,



then as elected president for a term, and following two additional corrupt and inefficient “neocolonial” governments, by means of a coup as military dictator. (Batista's regime enjoyed a 50,000-man army with cannon and armor, an air force and a navy, a “murderously efficient” uniformed and secret police, and full U.S. backing, including access to American arms, tanks and artillery.)



Tropical chic (or not)

From 1910 to the late 1950s, Cuba became a playground for the rich and privileged—while at the same time, peasants and the voiceless working classes suffered under ever-worsening conditions of poverty and degradation. A playground for vice, mobsters and the American Mafia (Lucky

Luciano moved to Havana in 1946, the notorious Meyer Lansky operated the *Riviera* hotel and casino), Havana had been turned into a popular destination for prostitution and gambling.

Billed as an “anything-goes tropical paradise, and land of romance,” and vigorously promoted around the world by the travel industry, Cuba was portrayed as “The Paris of the Caribbean” by means of “the unique graphic style of Cuba,” as documented in the recent book *Cuba Style: Graphics from the Golden Age of Design* by Vicki Gold Levi and Steven Heller. The book compiles “hundreds of vintage graphics of Cuba” combining elements of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Bauhaus, Modernism and “Vegas-style kitsch in a distinctly Cuban sensibility” in what Heller defines as the “Golden Age of Cuban Design.”

Pepe Menéndez, great-nephew of Enrique García Cabrera (one of that era's most famous painters and illustrators), and now the creative director at the famed cultural publishing house Casa de las Américas, disagrees strongly with Heller's celebration of Cuba's “merry capitalist style,” stating: “The ‘Golden Age of Cuban Design’ was certainly not the pre-Revolutionary period, but rather the mid-'60s through the mid-'70s—this really represented a unique freshness and a distinctive change of visual vocabulary in Cuba.”

Patria y Libertad

By the 1950s, Cuba was ripe for dramatic change. Batista's cronies were enriching themselves with bribes, and his thugs were bullying the country's citizens (and suppressing the increasingly-frequent spontaneous public strikes with police-

state brutality). In the countryside, three-quarters of farmable land was owned by foreigners—"Patria y Libertad" (homeland and liberty) was clearly just a nascent dream.

Following Batista's second coup, a revolutionary circle formed in Havana in 1953, leading to a (failed) assault on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Among the handful of survivors was the young lawyer and activist Fidel Castro, sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment—though he was released two years later (as part of a general amnesty granted to political prisoners following Batista's fraudulent election win in 1955) and went to México to prepare an ex-patriot revolutionary force.

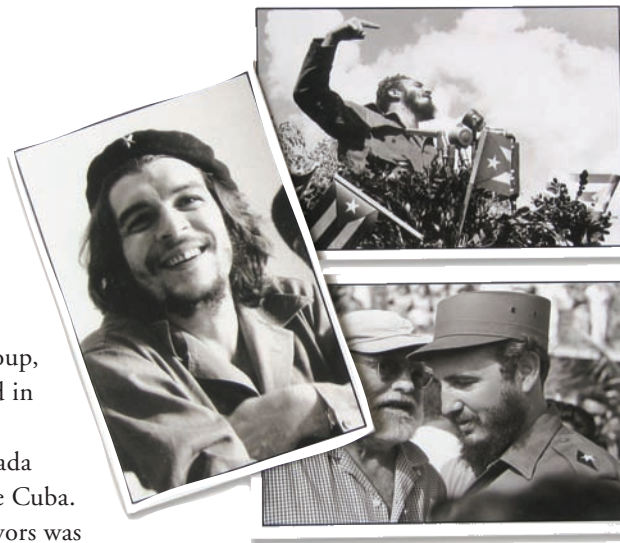
On December 2, 1956, Castro and 81 rebel *compañeros* navigated a small yacht (the *Granma*, now the name of the Cuban Communist Party's official newspaper) across the Gulf of Mexico and landed at Las Coloradas Beach in eastern Cuba to begin what would become the Cuban Revolution. Though the rebels were decimated in early fighting, a dozen stalwarts (Castro, his brother Raúl, the Argentine doctor Che Guevara and future *Comandante* Camilo Cienfuegos among them) managed to escape to the rugged Sierra Maestra mountains, where they set up a command post from which to extend their Revolutionary activities. A series of attacks against Batista's forces, aided by growing support of the populace, led to an overthrow of the government in the last days of 1958—Batista fled to the Dominican Republic on January 1, 1959, workers across the country responded to the call for a general strike and Castro was named prime minister two weeks later.

Among the new government's first acts were rent and electricity cost reductions, followed by the abolition of racial discrimination. Next, the First Agrarian Reform nationalized all land holdings over 400 hectares (988 acres), infuriating Cuba's largest landowners, primarily U.S. companies. A purge of the judicial system triggered the exodus of many judges and lawyers, followed by professionals, managers and technicians who did not share Castro's vision. Nationalization of Cuba's oil

refineries, banks and hundreds of the largest Cuban firms continued to raise the ire of the formerly privileged in Cuba, as well as the U.S.—between 1959 and 1970, a half-million Cubans left the country, most of them headed for Miami.

The Battle of Playa Girón

In the U.S., the Eisenhower administration decided to overthrow Cuba (documented in the National Security Council's approval of a resolution mandating an overthrow of the Cuban regime, yet stipulating that this must be done so as not to implicate the U.S., and thereby threaten its credibility among other Latin American states). Championed by Richard Nixon (then vice president), the CIA secured government funding and began recruiting and training Cuban exiles in 1960, months before diplomatic relations were severed with Cuba (January 1961). Throughout the year, growing ranks of "Brigade 2506" mercenaries trained at locations in southern Florida and Guatemala for a planned Cuban invasion, entailing a beach landing and possible mountain retreat. Based on previous successes in "assisting the removal of foreign governments" (such as those of Iranian prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, and Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in 1954), the CIA was confident that it could overthrow Castro and spark a popular uprising—this in turn was meant to lead to a request (from



Left: 1968 cover for the eponymous publishing-house magazine, *Casa de las Américas*; design by in-house staff.

1971 *Casa de las Américas* cover featuring Cuban heroes; design by in-house staff.

1964 cover design for *Cuba*, José Fresquet "Frémex," designer.

This page: **Today's most ubiquitous postcards, feature the Revolution, its heroes and photographic scenes from the late 1950s and early 1960s.** Top, clockwise from left: Che Guevara; Salas, photographer; Red Casa (Casa de las Américas), publisher. Fidel Castro c.1960; Raúl Corrales, photographer; Ediciones Aurelia, publisher. Ernest Hemingway with Fidel Castro; Salas, photographer; Red Casa, publisher. Bottom, clockwise from left: Cuban Flag; Henk van der Leeden, photographer; Cuba Images, publisher. "Movilización, La Habana," January 1961 (civil defense mobilization along the Malecón); Raúl Corrales, photographer; Red Casa, publisher. "Miliciana," c. 1960; A. Korda, photographer; Red Casa, publisher. "El Quijote de la Farola," 1959; A. Korda, photographer; Red Casa, publisher.

Cuba si!

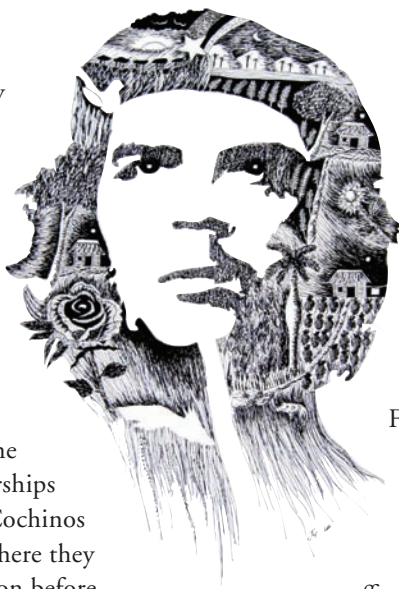
Cuban soil) for U.S. military support, the only “politically defensible” option for formal intervention that would not spark undesired geopolitical reactions.

On the morning of April 15, 1961, flights of U.S. light bomber aircraft displaying Cuban *Fuerza Aerea Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Air Force) markings left bases in Nicaragua for bombing raids on Cuban airfields, aiming to secure air superiority over the island in advance of troop landings. Two days later, some 1,500 armed exiles disembarked from U.S. warships on the Girón and Larga beaches of Bahía de Cochinos (the Bay of Pigs, on Cuba’s southern coast), where they hoped to find support from the local population before advancing to Havana.

The resulting “heroic battle” of the Bay of Pigs that ensued over the next 72 hours (a victory that Cubans still celebrate, though they call it the “Battle of Playa Girón”), saw outnumbered civil defense militiamen chase the disorganized would-be invaders into the Zapata marshes, before they were eventually captured, and later traded back to the U.S. for a substantial financial ransom. The attempted invasion had failed miserably, the fiasco proved to be a major international embarrassment for the Kennedy administration, and the directors of the CIA were forced to resign. The incident also greatly fueled Castro’s popularity, added nationalistic support to his socialist policies and made Cubans justifiably wary of future U.S. interventions. Immediately following the invasion attempt, Cuba turned to the Soviet Union for support against further aggression from its giant neighbor, helping pave the way for the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis that would follow eighteen months later.

Crisis and embargo

To this day, Cuba carries the dubious distinction of having been the scene of humankind’s closest brush with annihilation, as the Cold War teetered on the brink of becoming full-blown nuclear war. For thirteen tense and momentous days in October 1962, the U.S. and the Soviet Union faced each other down over nuclear missile installations in Cuba and a full-scale naval blockade, in what Cubans refer to as the “October Crisis,” Russians the “Caribbean Crisis” and Americans the “Cuban Missile Crisis.” Though history shows Cuba to have been a largely unwitting pawn of the two superpowers’ brinksmanship (the U.S. possessed the strategic firepower of nuclear submarines, and in 1961 had deployed Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic nuclear missiles aimed at Russia from Izmir, Turkey—this in turn had prompted Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba, aimed at Washington and other U.S. cities within a 2,000 km [1,250



miles] range), the tropical island nation has seemingly been saddled with the doomsday moniker. The showdown ended dramatically with Khrushchev offering to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba in return for President Kennedy’s guarantee not to invade Cuba, not to support any future invasion and for the U.S. to withdraw its missiles from Turkey.

Following the failed invasion attempt and missile fiasco, the U.S. began an economic, commercial and financial embargo on February 7, 1962, a sustained impediment on Cuba that (as of 2006) is still in effect. This ongoing attempt at economic strangu-

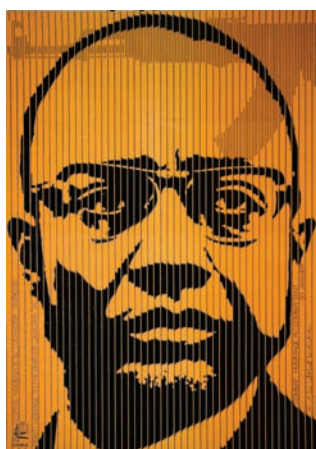
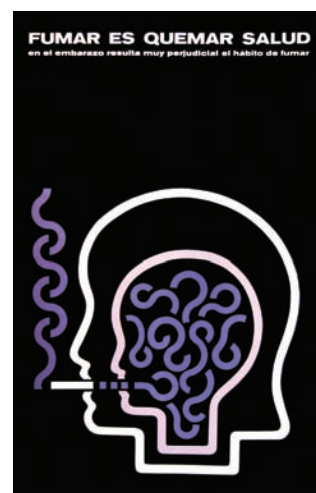
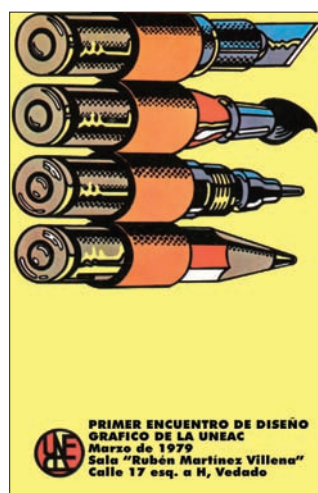
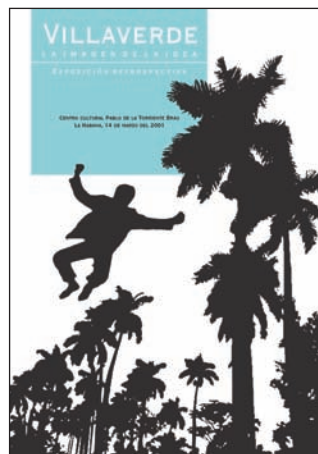
lation, cultural quarantine and intimidation of anyone who might attempt to break Cuba’s isolation is widely seen as bullying and punishment, a factor that has polarized much of Latin America (and socialist sentiment around the world) in favor of the Cuban “underdog.” Some critics argue that the embargo actually helps Castro more than it hurts him, by providing a scapegoat to blame for Cuba’s problems (which he does). Free market advocates argue that, as long as the embargo continues, non-U.S. foreign businesses in Cuba don’t have to compete with U.S. businesses and thus will gain a head-start advantage if and when the embargo is ended.

The United Nations General Assembly has condemned *el bloqueo* (the blockade) against Cuba for the last fifteen years running. The widely supported U.N. resolution has become an annual event—students and countless workers across the island stop their regular activities to watch the special one-hour feature on Cuba’s state-run television and then follow the voting at the U.N.’s General Assembly session.

Neighborhood bully

Cubans are acutely aware of their precarious position alongside their Goliath neighbor; they study history, and they see that the desire of the U.S. to colonize Cuba forms a long-standing pattern. U.S. “founding fathers” Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams both spoke of the need to incorporate Cuba into the nascent U.S. empire—Adams referred to Cuba as: “...an object of transcendent importance to the commercial and political interests of our union,” while Jefferson simply desired to “conquer and annex” the island nation—impossible at the time because of the strength of the British fleet.

After centuries of unwanted interference by the U.S., invasion and assassination attempts and a blockade of more than four decades, the polemics continue—the Bush administration’s latest declaration of Cuba as “one of the few outposts of



Left: **Inked portrait of Che**, 2005; Julio García Sánchez, illustrator.

This page: Selected Cuban posters from the past four decades. Top row, from left: **"Cristo guerrillero,"** an homage to Camilo Torres, a guerrilla priest, 1969; Alfredo González Rostgaard, designer; OSPAAAL, client.

Design exhibition of **Hector Villaverde**, 2001; Hector Villaverde, designer; Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente, client.

"Granma," commemorating the 20th anniversary of the rebels' landing in 1956; Emilio Gómez, designer; Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria, client.

Exhibition of **Cuban Posters** in Brazil, 2003; Nelson Ponce, designer; Faculdade Senac de Comunicação e Artes (São Paulo), client.

Middle row: Cuban film, **Memorias del subdesarrollo**, 1999; Osmany Torres, designer.

Inaugural graphic design exhibition at **UNEAC**, 1979. Francisco Masvidal, designer; UNEAC, client.

Masaki Kobayashi's film **Hara Kiri**, 1964; Antonio Fernández Reboiro, designer; ICAIC, client.

Anti-smoking campaign, 1970; Ernesto Padrón, designer; Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria, client.

Bottom row: Homage to African independence fighter **Amilcar Cabral**, 1974; Olivio Martínez, designer; OSPAAAL, client.

Movie **Besos Robados** (stolen kisses), 1970; René Azcuy, designer; ICAIC, client.

Self-published commentary about **"Paladares,"** Cuba's typical home restaurants, 1997; Pepe Menéndez, designer.

One of Cuban film's best known posters, for **Lucía** by director Humberto Solas, 1968; Raúl Martínez, designer; ICAIC, client.

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tyranny remaining in the world” is a continuation of a seemingly predetermined hostile stance.

In my opinion, this is a real shame. As a high-ranking Cuban minister told me recently, “Cubans really admire the creativity and energy of American citizens, and we share many loves with the U.S., such as cinema, jazz, baseball... Our objection is with Washington’s ongoing aggression against Cuba as a nation, and the ongoing hardships it has imposed on our people for nearly 50 years.”

Unlike the U.S., Canada has enjoyed a long and close relationship with Cuba, and a history of amity and bilateral co-operation—witness the decades-long friendship between Castro and Canada’s best-known prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, the ubiquitous yellow Canadian school buses on Havana streets, the quarter-million plus Cubans who now participate in the annual Terry Fox Run (to combat cancer), and the half-million sun-seeking Canadian tourists that populate Cuba’s spectacular beaches each year. The U.S.’s Helms-Burton Act (aimed at punishing non-U.S. corporations and non-U.S. investors who have economic interests in Cuba) was discounted in Canada for its extraterritorial pretensions.

Patriots, martyrs, icons

Cuba is a land that reveres its history, and that celebrates its heroes almost as deities—from its legendary first freedom fighter Hatuey, a sixteenth-century Taino chief who led uprisings against the Spanish (and was burned at the stake for his efforts), to the thirteen-year old Elián González, now living with his father in Cárdenas (the six-year-old survivor of a failed Florida Straits crossing made world news in 2002, at the center of a dramatic international custody battle), and the much-publicized “Five Cuban Heroes” currently being held in U.S. jails. Although Castro discouraged the use of his own likeness for many years, his well-known bearded face now appears quite frequently, as does the smiling image of his guerilla com-patriot Camilo Cienfuegos (1932–1959), along with the visages of a host of other social, literary and political leaders of Cuba’s past 500 years. Even foreigners are lionized on occasion, such as Cuba’s most famous writer-in-residence Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), who wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* while living in old Havana, and who appears on postcards with a smiling young Castro.

The iconic image of *guerrillero* Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1928–1967) by photographer Alberto Korda has been called “the most famous photograph in the world,” and following Che’s “martyr death” in a CIA-backed Bolivian operation, it came to represent socialist revolutionary movements world-wide. Though Che’s distinctive image is ubiquitous in Cuba, the country’s most omnipresent likeness is that of Cuba’s greatest hero, José Martí (1853–1895). A visionary, rebel, patriot and literary giant, Martí is recognized and studied as the leader of Cuba’s first drive for independence, and a forward-thinking influence on the movement for Latin American self-determination.

Leitmotif: Revolution

Keeping the Revolution alive has proven to be a remarkably successful domestic strategy. “Fidel Castro and his revolution are inseparable,” writes Tad Szulc (the *New York Times* reporter who also broke the Bay of Pigs story) in his book *Fidel: A Critical Portrait*. “Fidel Castro built his revolution primarily on the sentiments of Cuban history. He tapped the deep roots of mid-nineteenth century insurrections against Spanish colonialism and its themes of nationalism, radicalism and social-justice populism...no modern revolutionary leader or chief of state has undertaken such astounding personal risks and has been so directly engaged in the rigors of conspiracy, rebellion and open warfare...(his) bearded face may be one of the best-known physiognomies in the contemporary world.”

Enigmatic and indefatigable, Castro seems to thrive on contradiction and paradox. The uncompromising 79-year-old has held power longer than any other important head of government living today, remains a highly active and influential player in international affairs, has endured in defiance of ten successive U.S. presidents, defeated an American-supported invasion attempt and has survived hundreds of assassination attempts, (many backed by the CIA). To much of the developing world he is a hero, in part because he thinks people in the so-called “Third World” deserve the same kind of dignity as nations and individuals that the Revolution granted to Cubans.

Creativity and cultural expression

After the Revolution, *casas de cultura* (state-run cultural centers) were established throughout the country, in recognition



of the important role that culture plays in both national identity and creative wellbeing. The Cuban government has devoted considerable resources to artistic and cultural promotion ever since, in part through the comprehensive art education that is offered free of cost, and with its flagship Higher Institute of Art (ISA) in Havana, the influential national post-graduate art school that opened in 1976.

Cubans move with the lithe grace shared by many of their Latino counterparts in South and Central America, and dances such as the conga (popularized in the U.S. by Desi Arnaz in the 1930s), Afro-Cuban rhumba, and salsa are synonymous with Cuba—and Cubans love to dance. *The Ballet Nacional de Cuba* (co-founded by famous prima ballerina Alicia Alonso) is revered, and the repertoire of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba* (founded in 1962 to promote Cuban culture) provides a veritable history of popular Cuban and traditional Afro-Cuban dance.

Cubans are also huge cinema buffs, and knowledgeable ones at that. At Havana's annual *Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano* ("Cannes without the ass kissing," quips writer Conner Gorry), enthusiastic crowds take in movies, shorts, video and animation from across the hemisphere. Havana alone has over 200 cinemas, where crowds queue daily for constantly changing and affordable entertainment—attending the movie theatre costs two pesos (USD \$0.08), as does attending a rap concert; a seat in the ballpark (where baseball passions run high) will set you back a single peso.

Cuban television (with four commercial-free channels) is dominated by educational programming, including university-level courses on a vast range of subjects. In spite of the fact that the U.S. government spends over USD \$25 million annually beaming its pro-American Miami-based *Radio & Television Marti* at Cuba's citizens, the signal rarely makes it past the Cuban government's effective propaganda-jamming technology.

La Habana—city of beautiful ruins

"Havana...you bedazzle me and move me to pity, all at the same time," exclaims Jorge Perugorría, lead character and ex-pat Miami Cuban returning to the city of his youth in Humberto Solás' evocative film *Miel Para Oshun*. It's a sentiment shared

by many when they encounter this "city of beautiful ruins" and "fading memory of pre-Revolutionary glamour." Sophisticated, bustling and steeped in mystique, Cuba's capital city has been described as "...a temptress, inviting you to explore her charms, without ever revealing them all..."

Established in the early 1500s and the stalwart survivor of subsequent wars, invasions (pirates, French privateers, the British army) and revolutions, the heavily-fortified harbor city (the Caribbean's largest) has suffered relatively little damage in the past few centuries. That said, tropical heat, pervasive humidity and the regular onslaught of hurricanes *have* taken their toll, and many of Havana's buildings are now worn and crumbling. *Habana Vieja* (Old Havana) was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982, and is today recognized as the finest surviving colonial complex in the Americas.

Old Havana's historic city center is currently experiencing an influx of foreign capital and redevelopment as never before. Colonial-era houses convert into hostels, taverns and coffee shops; courtyards become concert venues; and pharmacies double as museums. The renovated buildings of Old Havana are only the most visible facet of a sustainable program that goes far beyond restoration work to rescue Cuba's historical heritage, while also preserving the social and cultural environment, and keeping in mind the people who live in the area. Unlike many other Latin American cities, you won't find rampant commercialization or slums in Havana.

McDonald's and the Gulag

Far from Havana, and located on the extreme eastern end of Cuba, is Guantanamo Bay, a 117 km² (45 square mile) U.S. enclave surrounded by a no-man's land of barbed wire and

A selection of Cuban logos and corporate identities, from left:

Capitolio Travel (travel agency); Sahily Tabares, designer.

Galeria Mariano (art gallery); Pepe Menéndez, designer.

Café Taberna; Roger Sospedra, designer.

"Cuba" logo for **National Tourism Authority** (1996 competition entry); Santiago Pujol, designer.

UN Anti-crime Initiative (1984 competition entry); Heriberto de Haro, designer.

Logo for **Tody** children's school supplies brand; Oscar Rodríguez, designer.

Habana 1791 fragrance brand; Lisette Leyva, designer.

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landmines. The military base (and since 2001, detention camp for some 400 Taliban fighters, Afghanis and suspected members of al Qaeda described by Washington as “dangerous, unlawful combatants”) today houses the only McDonald’s fast-food outlet in Cuba, as well as the 9,500 Americans it serves. Guantanamo Bay has been in U.S. occupation since its troops first landed there during the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Amnesty International describes the Guantanamo detention camp as “the gulag of our time,” while billboards in Havana denounce the naval base-turned-detention center as a concentration camp, and decry the U.S. torture there and abuses at Abu Ghraib as the work of “fascists.” Anti-torture activists around the world (such as the Catholic Worker movement) are protesting the illegal detention of Guantanamo prisoners (many have been held for more than three years without trial) and call for the prison camp to be closed.

No es fácil!

Life in modern Cuba “is not easy” (as many will readily tell you) and it’s an enigma. Ideals make thin soup. The economy is publicly owned and sluggish, and the population is poor, particularly when measured against international standards (for example, Cuba’s GDP per capita is USD \$3,300, compared to México’s \$10,000, Spain’s \$25,100, or \$41,800 in the U.S.). The average monthly salary of 350 to 500 pesos (including teachers, doctors and lawyers) converts to between USD \$15 and \$20. Only one in five thousand Cubans owns a cellular phone, most cannot afford a vehicle (or fuel for that matter, which sells at the same price as in North America), few homes have computers, Internet access is rare for the average person and “disposable income” is definitely an oxymoron—even if money was not a factor (which it certainly is), the consumer goods found elsewhere in the world (and largely taken for granted) are simply not available in Cuba. On top of that, the foreign goods and services, such as restaurants that tourists might visit, must be paid for in “convertible pesos” that convert at a rate of approximately 25:1.

Recent problems include high oil prices, recessions in key export markets such as sugar and nickel, and repeated damage from hurricanes. A severe housing shortage often results in three or four generations living under the same roof, many goods are unavailable, public infrastructure everywhere seems to be crumbling, power outages are the norm—the list of hardships goes on and on. In this challenging milieu, many Cubans find themselves living “dual lives” in what is essentially a double economy: they have jobs and purchase goods legally, but also buy and sell through a thriving, yet embattled, black market (meat, eggs, tools, etc.). Life in the countryside is even more difficult than in the cities and resorts, with less access to the affluent and fast-growing tourism industry.

Yet, Cubans are survivors, have developed a remarkable resilience in the face of numerous difficulties, have a great (if somewhat ironic) sense of humor and are among the most generous and gracious people I’ve ever met. The quality of life of the average Cuban has increased dramatically since the Revolution—Cubans can now boast the best education in Latin America (totally free, including technical schools and universities, and with an adult literacy rate of 96.7%—the highest in the Western hemisphere), they have free universal healthcare, free housing, free daycare and each Cuban is allotted a basic monthly 30-product food basket by means of a *libreta*, or ration card. Cubans have an amazingly integrated society, and women make up a full two-thirds of the professional and technical workforce (doubling the percentage of most so-called “developed” countries).

With few of the consumerist distractions that saturate modern life in other Western countries (and with admittedly few advancement opportunities or incentives), most Cubans are rich in time, talkative, affable and seem to truly enjoy a simple everyday life and whatever niceties happen to come their way.

Youthful passion, world culture

In 1961, Castro defined the relationship between art and the Cuban regime: “Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing.” In 1976, the Cuban constitution incorporated the following statement: “Artistic creation is free as long as its content does not oppose the Revolution. Forms of expression are free...” (though the open question of “what opposing the Revolution” means might explain the seemingly inconsistent vacillation of Cuban artistic policies since—wavered between liberalism and dogmatism). Over the ensuing decades, an ever-changing dynamic between art and state has created a challenging quest for Cuban artists and designers in their search for creative space and critical validity, particularly for the younger generation. As art historian Antonio Eligio (Tonel) explains, “From the end of the 1960s

Right: **Logotype for the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center**; Pedro Abreu, designer.

Havanaautos (car rental agency); Ricardo Garcés, designer.

Logo for “1st of May” socialist celebration; Editora Política, client (designer unknown).

Encuentro de grabado exhibition poster, 2001; Eduardo Marín, designer; Centro de Artes Visuales, client.

“America Latina” poster for the International Week of Solidarity with Latin America, 1970; Asela Pérez, designer; OSPAAAL, client.

“Hasta la victoria siempre” (Until victory, forever) poster homage to Che Guevara, 1968; Antonio Pérez “Ñiko,” designer; Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria, client.

“Serie Revolución,” a series of ten posters celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, 1969; Faustino Pérez/Ernesto Padrón/José Papiol, designers; Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria, client.



CENTRO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO
wifredo lam

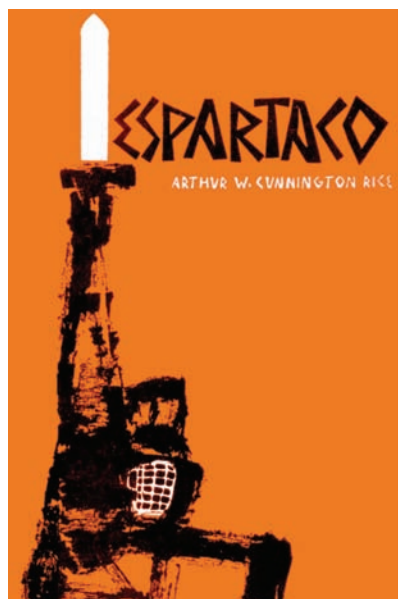
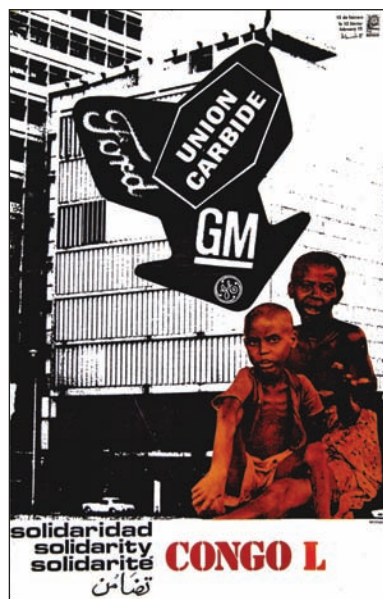
Havanautos



MAYO

1ro en defensa del Socialismo





until the early 1980s, bureaucracy and dogmatic ideology defined the cultural arena. Revolutionary fervor encouraged the ascent of young artists and the marginalization and withdrawal of the major older figures.”

Resourceful, creative

When the Soviet subsidies ended in 1990 (worth USD \$4 to \$6 billion annually) with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the COMECON economic block, Cuba found itself in a deep recession. During the so-called “Special Period” that ensued (1990–1995), serious food shortages resulted in nationwide weight-loss, with the average Cuban adult losing between five to twenty pounds. The tourism industry was rapidly developed in compensation, with the country’s exquisite beaches, rich historic sites and Old Havana providing attractive destinations for Europeans and Canadians in particular. The best food in Cuba is now found in the numerous *paladares* (private restaurants in homes, allowed up to twelve seats) that saw their advent in 1995. Although not allowed to serve beef, lobster or shrimp (these are reserved for state-run restaurants) Cuban cooks are extraordinarily creative in working with a relatively scarce palette.

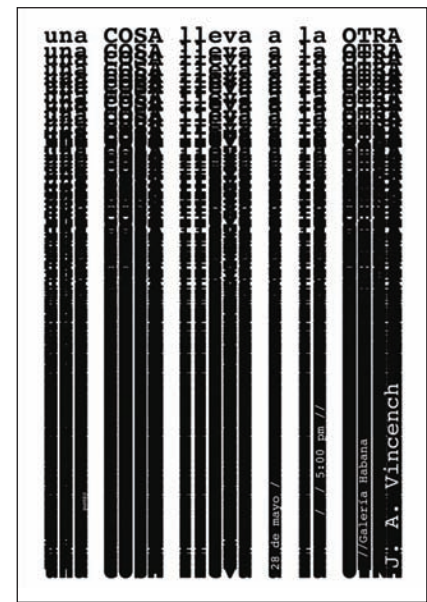
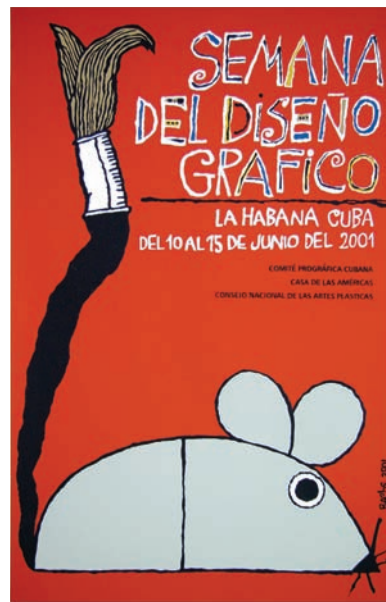
Cuba’s answer to the withdrawal of Soviet agricultural chemical imports led to a total restructuring of the country’s formerly large-scale, mechanized, chemical-dependent agricultural model—a massive initiative has converted the entire country to strictly organic production—by law, only organic farming is now permitted. In response to the chronic shortage of prescription medicines (largely due to the U.S. embargo), Cubans have reverted to the use of medicinal plants, traditional medicines and tinctures, a movement that holds future promise in a world in search of more holistic solutions. One of the more

visible effects of the embargo is the low number of modern cars on the streets of Cuba. By necessity, Cubans have made a virtue of keeping pre-1960 American automobiles in running order, and it is now a haven for 1950s vintage American cars. Cuba’s slow economy has also fostered many artists and artisans (as opposed to industrialists), further boosting centuries-old traditions and a culture of musicians, artists and poets that are now respected around the world.

Poster power = Cuban style

In the July 1969 issue of *Cuba Internacional*, graphic designer Félix Beltrán eloquently explained Cuban design ideals: “We must bear in mind that a new society is being established in Cuba and graphic art plays an important role in communicating the message to this society...If I were asked what the most important thing in Cuban graphic art is, I would reply that it is the transmission of its content to the people; for it is through Cuban graphic art that we can perceive our social objectives, our ideology, our political and economic perspectives.”

Though numerous books have been published on Cuban posters in ensuing decades, none was as influential in raising awareness of its eclectic phenomena as the oversized 1970 digest *The Art of Revolution* by Dugald Stermer and the late Susan Sontag. In the book’s brilliant introductory essay, Sontag delineates the common purpose of all political posters: ideological motivation. “Commercial advertising imagery cultivates the capacity to be tempted, the willingness to indulge private desires and liberties. The imagery of political posters cultivates the sense of obligation, the willingness to renounce private desires and liberties... In this revolution, a revolution of consciousness that requires turning the whole country into a school, posters are an important method (among others) of public teaching.”



Sontag's description of the posters' zeitgeist and ideals is insightful and pointed. "The élan and aesthetic self-sufficiency of the Cuban posters seem even more remarkable when one considers that the poster itself is a new art form in Cuba. Before the revolution, the only posters to be seen in Cuba were the most vulgar types of American billboard advertising. Indeed, many of the pre-1959 posters in Havana had English texts, addressing themselves not even to the Cubans but directly to the American tourists whose dollars were a principle source of Cuba's earnings, and to the American residents, most of them businessmen who controlled and exploited Cuba's economy...Cuban poster art does not embody radically new values. The values represented in the posters are internationalism, diversity, eclecticism, moral seriousness, commitment to artistic excellence, sensuality—the positive sum of Cuba's refusal of philistinism or crude utilitarianism."

Cuban poster art was launched by the Revolution: the use of posters grew with the need to communicate political ideas and information to large audiences (about the nationwide literacy campaign of 1961, for example), and acted to enlarge moral consciousness and to attach a sense of moral responsibility to an increasing number of issues. Posters provided a voice for newly-formed cultural organizations such as the Cuban Cinema Art and Industry Institute (ICAIC), the Organization of Solidarity With the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL), the Cuban Artists and Writers Union (UNEAC), the *Casa de las Américas* (with its own poster-making workshop) and the *Editora Política*, the official propaganda department of the Communist Party.

Though rooted in Revolutionary ideology and visual culture, Cuban poster designs did not follow any prescribed "official style," but could generally be described as eclectic, distinctly modernist, simple (in keeping with the Revolutionary ethos

of modernity) and often using abstraction. Limited reproduction options made silk-screen printing the medium of choice, in part due to the lack of functional lithographic presses and paper for printing, following the beginning of the economic blockade. It's evident that the hardships and challenges encountered by Cuban designers contributed to the creativity and innovation apparent in the propaganda art of the 1960s, described by author Veerle Poupeye as: "...far more imaginative than the dull socialist realism of the Soviet Union or China," and by Dugald Stermer as "... (avoiding) the simplistic, primitive neo-classicism of Soviet Socialist realism...and, the stylistic excesses of the 'heroic worker' school."

Without a doubt, Cuban posters represent the best-known visual body of work, and the medium most closely associated

Left: "Congo Solidarity" poster, 1973; Rafael Morante, designer; OSPAAAL, client.

Book cover for *Spartacus*, 1956; Rafael Morante, designer; Alona Publishing House, client.

Poster commemorating the 400th anniversary of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*—"un Quijote más humano" (a more human Quijote), 2005; Ricardo Garcés, designer.

This page: "Uruguay: Liberty for the political prisoners!"—a solidarity poster opposing the Uruguayan military dictatorship, 1975; Guillermo Menéndez, designer; Departamento de Orientación Revolucionaria del Comité Central del Partido, client. (Author's note: Rafael Morante shared with me Guillermo's frugal and creative technique for creating this poster's artwork: the four different-sized surfaces of a rubber pencil eraser dipped in India ink formed the prison's stones and window bars.)

"Graphic design week" poster for the *ICOGRADA* events in Havana, 2001; Eduardo Muñoz Bachs, designer; Prográfica, client. (This was the last poster designed by the great Bachs before he died later that year at age 64—he is recognized as one of Cuba's most prolific illustrators and designers, with over 1,000 posters to his name.)

Una Cosa lleva a la OTRA (one thing implies the other), poster for an artist's exhibition, 2003. Jorge Ferret Vincench, Puntá-G Diseño Gráfico, designer.

Cuba si!

with “distinctively Cuban” communication design to this day. Daniel Walsh, co-founder of the U.S.-based *Cuba Poster Project*, has called Cuban posters “...the single most focused, potent body of political graphics ever produced in this hemisphere.” (See *The Cuban Poster Crisis* in CA #251, September/October 1994)

Diseño gráfico

Following decades of difficulties, censorship and national economic ruin, Cuban designers are now experiencing greater artistic freedom than at any time in the past 50 years. The majority of designers work for publishing houses and ad agencies, though freelancing has become increasingly popular as well, and over 300 designers are registered as “independent creators.” The art scene is also thriving as never before, bearing the fruit of deeply personal, vibrant and politically-involved expression, and benefiting directly from the favorable cultural climate and the booming tourism sector (with its desirable source of foreign currency). Many designers and artists live with family members in small homes (reflecting the pervasive housing shortage), though some have independent studios. It’s fair to say that artists and designers do better nowadays than those in many other sectors, especially those such as teachers and doctors in state-controlled employment who have to depend on fixed, subsistence-level incomes.

Most of Cuba’s younger designers are graduates of the Institute of Industrial Design (ISDI), an autonomous university formed in 1984 under the auspices of *Oficina Nacional de Diseño Industrial* (ONDI). The school’s rector, Dr. Arq. José Cuendias Cobreros, defines ISDI’s primary aim as: “to solve Cuban problems through design, and also to open a space for Cuban design,” by and large involving non-commercial activities. On a recent visit to the school, I viewed information design projects by students such as the creation of an identity for the Cuban national census; publication of low-cost literary works for mass distribution (classics printed on newsprint); public information campaigns regarding mosquitoes and Dengue fever; the “Cuba si” tourism promotion; hospital signage systems; and interface design for a comprehensive primary school learning system housed in a CD library, especially developed for children in remote villages where solar-powered computers provide equal literacy as for urban kids (1.3 million students grades one through six are now using these tools).

The Cuban Prográfica Committee is a nonprofit organization representing the most experienced and accomplished Cuban graphic designers (though its membership comprises only a small percentage of the country’s 1,000 estimated practitioners). Formed as a subset of the National Plastic Arts Council of the Ministry of Culture of Cuba (UNEAC) it has been a member of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) since 1997. Hector Villaverde,

Prográfica’s president, describes the design climate of the past decade: “Economic growth in the mid-’90s in areas such as tourism and the oil and mining industries has increased the amount of work available for graphic designers, and the development of high-quality products for export is something recent in Cuban society. The introduction of new technologies in Cuba, although at a very modest level, has made a major change in graphic design—one that is welcomed by designers. Multi-media, the Web and interactive design are just starting to become a factor in Cuba.”

Prográfica is now working on an ambitious initiative to create a “House of Graphic Design and Typography” in the historical center of Old Havana, an area that housed printing shops during the city’s zenith of typographic art during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “House” will act as a themed cultural center, an exhibition venue for design and patrimonial graphic works and as a focal point for the profession.

Cuban designers look forward with anticipation to the visits of colleagues throughout the world in October 2007 for a week of design events being planned in Havana around the XXII ICOGRADA Congress and General Assembly. (U.S. designers are particularly welcomed, a fact underlined for me in discussions with the Cuban Ministry of Culture—their only concern is with Washington’s continuing intransigence in not permitting American citizens to freely visit Cuba.)

Relatively isolated from American influences (though at the same time embracing world culture), modern Cuban graphic design has developed unique traits and characteristics. Unlike consumer-oriented countries where design is primarily used to sell or advertise, visual communication in Cuba serves as a means of conveying information, promoting political consciousness, and as public expression. I have had the privilege to meet with many graphic designers in Cuba, and they have warmly welcomed me into their homes and studios. I feel a deep empathy with the desire for progress and change that many express and I can’t help thinking that for the future, Cuban designers may well have unique (and hard-earned) lessons to offer the rest of the world. Lessons about simplicity and sustainability, how to live more fully with less and how to embrace passion—increasingly rare traits in an over-indulgent world of opulence and excess. **CA**

Robert L. Peters has visited Cuba several times in recent years—he co-organized and chaired the Havana Design Week in 2001 (held in the Che Guevara Memorial Hall, Casa de las Américas), and has been involved in advocacy regarding the ICOGRADA Design Congress to be held in Havana in fall of 2007. He would like to express thanks to Prográfica and to the designers who contributed their work for this article. Special thanks to Santiago Pujol, Hector Villaverde and Pepe Menéndez for their collaboration, assistance and support.

