



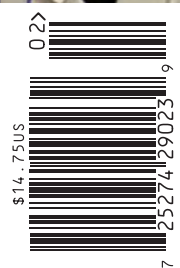
# ART

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ANOTHER LOOK INTO THE TWELFTH HAVANA BIENNIAL  
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Art, Design & Architecture: Diango Hernández – Liset Castillo





**Rita Longa's House, Miramar**

The corner banquette of the sitting area is anchored by Longa's mural of tropical foliage (description on the book)

Photo: Adrián Fernández

Courtesy Hermes Mallea

DAVID FREELAND

# ARCHITECTURE, ART & PROMISE

## Hermes Mallea Discusses the Great Houses of Havana

Two young women in muslin dresses sit in a relaxed yet formal pose, surrounded by aristocratic markers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban life: rococo gilt tables, chandeliers, birds mounted inside shiny glass domes, and, at the far end of the tiled parlor, a giant mirror that captures the entire scene—including the photographer, George Bernard—in reverse. For architect Hermes Mallea, who included it as part of his book, *Great Houses of Havana*, the photograph is astonishing both for its rarity and completeness of detail. In 1860 Bernard, later to become known for his images documenting the American Civil War, was given unprecedented access to the private areas of the Palacio de Los Condes de Santovenia, in Havana's Plaza de Armas. The scenes he captured provide an intimate view into a way of life closed to most outsiders.

"The interpretation of historical interior photographs is what I'm all about," explains Mallea over lunch near the New York architecture and design firm, M (Group), he owns with his business and life partner, Carey Maloney. "Looking at this image and seeing Bernard in the mirror, noticing how the console tables are covered in muslin because you don't want insects to ruin the gilding. There's so much information when you look at these pictures."

Mallea observes how the photograph reveals a number of traditional Cuban elements, including louvered windows that controlled the intensity of sunlight and wicker chairs that could be picked up and carried throughout the room.

"We can understand how life in Cuba responded to the climate, how the family moved around the house during the day, looking for breezes and trying to stay out of the sun. Privacy versus climate is such a huge issue in Cuba. In older Cuban houses that have tall ceilings, often the only door that divides the hallway from Mother and Father's bedroom is a glass screen—a *mampara*—so, basically, if your parents were having sex in the room next door you were hearing them! But everybody preferred to have the breezes blowing than to have privacy. It's a very different concept of the home life than the one I was familiar with as a child."

In the preface to *Great Houses of Havana*, Mallea discusses his childhood in Miami, explaining how two great aunts played a formative role in his upbringing after the death of his mother. These women, including "Chea," Mercedes López de Quintana Sartorio (a photographer who won several Cuban and international prizes), captivated him with stories of the family's former house in the small coastal city of Gibara.

"I grew up in one of these extended, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*-type of Cuban families where you had all these generations, and there was a lot of talk in suburban Miami of this house and this life and these family members back in Cuba. I heard about characters such as my great aunts' grandmother, who had been dead since 1870, but they talked about her almost as if she were amongst us."

Mallea went to school to become an architect, pursuing what he characterizes wryly as "an artistic yet acceptable career for Cubans" (his brother Charles became an architect as well), and later studied historic preservation at Columbia University. All the while, his fascination with family photos and anecdotes continued.

"These pictures and my family members described such an exotic lifestyle compared to 1960s Miami. And also because their town was a provincial port town, because of the time lag, they were living almost a generation behind the times. So when we were talking about their house it was about gathering rainwater and the person who brought coal to the wood stove. What they were describing was an exotic world that I found very appealing."

Ten years ago Mallea was invited to Havana for an architecture biennial, and instantly became "smitten." It was the start of a relationship with the city, its buildings, history and inhabitants, that now brings him to Cuba several times a year for his own research and as a lecturer for American visitors.

"I was fortunate at that biennial to meet a group of older architects, people who are in their eighties now, some of whom actually knew a great uncle of mine, who were very kind to me from the beginning. They encouraged me and my interest, so I kept going back."



**La Casa del Vedado** / In the front hall, a pair of side chairs flanks a console table—Cuban-made pieces from the 1860s (description on the book)

**Palacio de los Capitanes Generales** / Two Carrara Marble bath-tubs, carved in the form of shells, recall the Infanta's bathroom located in his area (description on the book)

Photos: Néstor Martí / Courtesy Hermes Mallea

**Bernardo Solís' House, El Vedado** / In the Winter garden, intricate lattice frames mirror panels while ornate iron-and-glass doors connect the space to the outdoors (description on the book)

Photo: Adrián Fernández / Courtesy Hermes Mallea

*Great Houses of Havana*, subtitled *A Century of Cuban Style*, juxtaposes vintage and contemporary scenes of the city's architectural treasures; a "then and now" approach that builds upon an understanding of the living past as experienced through a rich, multilayered present. It was published by Monacelli Press in 2011, the same year Mallea organized an exhibition of his family's photographs for a museum on the Plaza de Armas.

"The book is a celebration of the sophistication of architecture and design in Havana," Mallea explains, "of how it *wasn't* provincial, how it was very directly influenced by what was going on in the rest of the world, architecturally. You know, for a Caribbean island, the fact that we were producing architecture at that level is something to be very proud of. One thing that's been really gratifying to me since the book came out is that people in Havana recognize that, and people in the Miami exile community recognize it. To me, the celebration and the pride of our design accomplishments unite us."

Organized chronologically, by date of construction (and, as the city expanded westward from its harbor, geographically), Mallea's book offers striking interior and exterior shots of landmarks including the Palacio Episcopal of Havana and Finca Vigía, Ernest Hemingway's Cuban home, as well as lesser-known buildings such as the modernist residences of noted Cuban sculptor Rita Longa (1912-2000) and Swiss banker Alfred von Schulthess. One of the most flamboyant structures on display is the Vedado house of Bernardo Solís, founder of Cuba's popular El Encanto department store. Like a luxury furniture showroom, the Solís house is a mishmash of over-the-top architectural styles, incorporating French Empire and Rococo, Spanish Plateresque and Art Nouveau. Design elements include a bronze-railed staircase and an astonishing trompe de l'oeil floor of Spanish tiles arranged to resemble an intricately brocaded carpet.

"Every floor had a different floor tile," Mallea remarks, "because the owners had access to all this stuff. You stood in one place and you saw three different designs."

Beyond the quality of the new images, many of them taken by Havana photographers Adrian Fernández and Nestor Martí, *Great Houses* is notable for the insight and readability of Mallea's text. In his first chapter, "Havana in the Nineteenth Century," the author constructs a historical and ideological foundation to support the architectural one he presents later. Longtime struggles between native-born Cubans (*criollos*) and administrative figures of the Spanish colonial government (*peninsulares*) are examined in light of the increasing political, economic and social influence of the United States. In the process, Mallea does not shy from painful truths, including the role slavery played in the creation of Cuba's sugar wealth.

"My family owned slaves," he comments. "My great aunts remembered family slaves that they were growing up with. That direct connection is very real and it's very disturbing. And certain slaves stayed with the family. There was one slave woman in particular who was given as a little girl to my great grandmother, also a little girl, so they were essentially the same age. She stayed in the house for the rest of her life. After emancipation, where was she going to go?"

These discussions are useful because they underscore the way in which social and political forces shaping Cuba as a nation influenced its architecture as well. As a creative form, architecture is unique in that it serves a practical role, offering shelter, while embodying artistic ideals that reflect the dreams, struggles and ideology of a given society. Unlike a painting, for example, a fine building requires emotional *and* physical interaction to bring it to life. For this reason, any discussion of great houses is incomplete without an exploration of the lives of the people who inhabited them.

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As Mallea observes, “Usually books about historical architecture are pretty much about construction, or the style of the architecture, and they don’t put it in the neighborhood or historical context so much. I’m interested in what people’s lifestyle was like. In Havana there was such a great opportunity to tell about the clubs people would have gone to, the churches, the schools and government buildings, the auditorium where they went to hear music or watch ballet. Opening the book up to what was going on in their lives at the time they were living in their houses allowed me to connect more to the city at large.”

While the thrust of Mallea’s narrative is residential, a number of commercial buildings play supporting roles. During the 1920s, President Machado’s government embarked on an ambitious program of beautification and public works (much of it financed by loans from U.S. corporations) designed to remake Havana into a tourist mecca. Mallea includes images of the Presidential Palace, Hotel Nacional, the Havana Biltmore Yacht and Country Club, and other structures from this fervent period, one that combined decorative allusions to Cuba’s Spanish heritage with the influence of luxury architectural styles then prevalent in the United States—in particular, “Mission Revival” with its shaded balconies, red-tile roofs, and white stucco walls. Mallea is at his finest as an author when discussing how the relationship between *criollo*, *peninsular*, and the United States that had long characterized Cuban life now became evident in the physical design of the buildings themselves. Havana’s 1920s architecture literally cemented dichotomies between familiar and exotic, local and international, that persist in conceptualizations of the city to this day.

Such thematic emphases would help Mallea prepare for his next book project, *Escape: the Heyday of Caribbean Glamor* (2014), a photographic survey of the growth and mythification of Caribbean luxury resorts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not surprisingly, these vacation destinations tended to have short life spans, because their appeal had always been rooted in a gossamer sense of unreality that was by definition ephemeral.

“In *Escape*, I chose to use as few contemporary pictures as possible. I was celebrating the moment when these places were in their heyday. Things change, and not always for the better. Whenever I was looking at contemporary views of these places it just felt wrong. The photo research for that book was arduous, because it was about trying to find things that were evocative of the moment in time that each place represented.”

By contrast, the book Mallea is working on now, as yet untitled, will be informed by today’s Havana, how people of different professions and backgrounds live there “with great style.” The book will showcase homes of professors, architects, music promoters, and art collectors, along with eccentrics such as Mary McCarthy, a Newfoundland native who moved to Havana with her Spanish husband in 1923 and decided to stay after the Revolution, even though her large inheritance remained frozen in a U.S. bank (she died in 2009, weeks shy of her 109<sup>th</sup> birthday).

“I want to create an antidote to the Robert Polidori images of decrepit, crumbling Havana,” Mallea asserts. “Not that he hasn’t done a beautiful job, but he conditioned people to think of Havana in one particular way, as this frozen-in-time, completely exotic and weird world. And I am saying it’s *not* all falling apart, there are people who are living with very Cuban style, but very stylishly.”

In the end it is Havana’s status as a world cultural capital, filled with art and architecture, that ensures its continued vitality. Although numerous individual buildings are collapsing or in extreme disrepair, the city’s larger fabric is remarkably intact, having been spared the urban renewal and highway construction that obliterated entire districts in many North American cities. Today it is possible to walk neighborhood to neighborhood and experience the way Havana’s history reveals itself through the built environment. For Mallea, this sense of completeness offers hope for the city’s future.

“What is so wonderful about Havana is that, as destroyed as much of it is, it’s all there, in a way. Vast neighborhoods from the 1920s and 50s—at least they haven’t been torn down and replaced with parking lots. There’s so much promise there.” ◀