1-30-2014

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Building Collapses and Severe Shortage Worsen Housing Situation for Cubans

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Category/Department: Cuba
Published: 2014-01-30

Buildings that received little or no maintenance for decades, faulty construction, frequent collapses, and an overall 39% of homes in Cuba in poor or fair condition are worsening the housing situation on the island, confirmed government reports and details from the most recent population census.

Cuba has more than 3 million houses, of which 61% are considered to be in good condition, but the rest are in fair or poor condition. The deterioration in some areas of the Cuban capital, such as in Havana's central district overlooking the Caribbean and its neighboring colonial Old Havana district, is so bad that uninformed tourists believe that those areas were bombed during some distant conflict with the US because of the profusion of collapsed buildings and deterioration of the streets.

The housing crisis is a recurring theme in demographic studies on Cuban families because of the generational issues caused by several generations of the same family having to live together, including those who were previously married and, after divorcing, were never able to move into independent housing. Now, after decades of restrictions on the sale of private property, the authorization for those sales announced by President Raúl Castro in 2011 is a relief for those holding convertible currency (NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2012).

Musicians, athletes, taxi drivers, owners of small restaurants, tourism-sector workers, doctors, and other professionals who temporarily served in other countries are now those who most often have hard currency available to repair their properties or to consider moving into a better home. In recent years, the government persecuted and criminalized those people buying and selling private property or engaging in other real estate transactions where there was economic benefit.

Worsening crisis

Alfredo is a 51-year-old historian and writer who lives in Santos Suárez, a neighborhood in Havana that attracted professionals and members of the middle class in the 1950s. He still shares a one-bedroom, one-bath apartment with his 76-year-old mother. They have spent a lifetime in the tiny domicile without hope of moving to a larger home.

The housing shortage on the island is estimated at more than 500,000 homes, while 8.5 out of 10 buildings are in need of repairs. To remedy this situation, the state would have to pay US$4 billion and build between 60,000 and 70,000 homes each year, but it can barely raise 16,000 new homes annually, while the people manage to build between 8,000 and 10,000 on their own, according to the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (INV) last September.

The vulnerability of the population and their housing was dramatically confirmed in November 2013 when heavy rains hit the western provinces. In Havana, two people were killed, 26 buildings collapsed, 201 buildings partially collapsed, and 627 households were affected. Any hurricane that
threatens the Cuban capital means a nightmare for many of its inhabitants, who refuse to leave their homes for fear of theft even though they are in danger of their home collapsing around them.

The eastern area of the island will take years to recover from 2012's Hurricane Sandy, which swept through three provinces, including the country's second-largest city Santiago de Cuba. The hurricane caused 22,396 collapsed buildings of which about 1,700 have been alleviated by the authorities. However, the government still faces another 40,000 collapsed buildings caused by past weather events, officials said (NotiCen, March 3, 2005, and July 31, 2008).

Raúl Castro and his government have a more realistic grasp of the nation's economic constraints and the state's inability to assume all the problems accumulated during a half century of communism. In 2010 the decision was made to allow construction licenses and the sale of building materials, and to grant private loans and subsidies for the repair, maintenance, and construction of houses.

However, citizens complain that there are not enough materials in the state outlets and the prices of those sold at the stores using convertible currency far exceed their ability to pay. The average monthly salary is US$20, which proves to be insufficient compared to the costs of necessities such as food, transportation, and utilities.

This relaxation in rules has been taken advantage of by Cubans with additional income earned from the emerging private sector related to private services and tourism, as well as those who receive remittances from the emigrant community in the US and Europe. To repair or build a house in Cuba can take more than five years of effort because of the lack of materials, tools, and skilled labor in a nation where training in construction and agricultural work was looked down upon for decades.

Tenements and slums

One of the promises of the revolutionary project in the 1960s was to construct decent housing for all Cubans. President Fidel Castro and his government prioritized construction in the provinces that had been ignored during the exorbitant urban modernization and residential building boom in Havana from the 1930s until 1959.

Today, 2.1 million people live in Havana, and its floating population is estimated at more than 500,000 but could be even higher because of the limitations imposed by the authorities on registering people from the provinces in each household. The government has established a correlation between the size of the home and the number of members that can be added. However, immigrants from other provinces reside in their relatives' homes without legally registering, all the while fearful of being denounced by the neighborhood watchdogs.

Of the 700,000 dwellings in Havana, 12% are in poor condition, according to the authorities. However, statistics suggest that the situation is much more serious because, in Central Havana alone, about 230 buildings collapse annually. Of the 46,277 households in Central Havana, 22,712 are in bad condition and almost 4,200 are in critical condition. The area is so densely populated that 163,763 inhabitants live within just 5 sq km.

Marisela, a resident of Centro Habana, walks through her neighborhood avoiding the sidewalks; she asserts that the balconies are so precarious that they could collapse and injure passersby. The deterioration of many years is combined with structural modifications that residents have made inside the buildings; many have built intermediate floors inside their apartments called barbacoas,
these possible thanks to the high ceilings of the buildings constructed in the early decades of the 20th century.

In Havana, tenements, illegal settlements, and Comunidades de Tránsito abound. The latter are old facilities like schools or government buildings refurbished to house those who have lost their homes. The stay in these cubicles of about 25 sq m per family can be extended for more than 20 years while waiting to get replacement housing. Overcrowding and different social backgrounds increase illegal activities, personal uncertainty, and conditions of poor hygiene in these facilities.

The provincial government says the Cuban capital has more than 6,000 ciudadelas, which are old houses and buildings subdivided to house multiple families. Some are spacious colonial and neoclassical mansions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of these ciudadelas are full of immigrants from other provinces.

The housing crisis is key to understanding many of the island's phenomena, including low birth rates—very alarming for the future economic development of the country—the increase in marginal behaviors, and the exodus of young people to the outside in search of job opportunities and to fulfill their dreams of raising a family and living in privacy under their own roof.

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