Research subject:
The recent implementation of Cuban most ambitious plan for economic transformation since the Revolution of 1959, whether considered as a transitional phase towards capitalism - from an evolutionist, mainly 'yankee', perspective - or as a 'new stage of the Revolution' capable to reinvigorate the Antillean socialism, arouse great resonance both on international media and between scholars worldwide. Several analysis focused on Raúl Castro’s plan of actualizacion del modelo economico from a political and economical perspective. The aim of the graduation research has been to tackle this topic with the apparatus of our discipline, Architecture, in order to understand and unveil its spatial, urban, built and discursive implications.

Research questions and methodology:
The research has been carried out in a fruitful collaboration with Matteo Schiavone. As an a posteriori consideration, we strongly belive that the possibility of confrontation, discussion and exchange that a teamwork offers can lead to a deeper investigation and a more sharpened and refined consciousness of the results achieved.

The research methodology included the review of a considerable part of the existing interdisciplinary literature, not only related to the recent reformist stage but also to the precedent dynamics of the socialist period and to the broader historical analysis since the Spanish colonization. Moreover a one-month fieldwork carried out between March and April 2014 allowed the collection of several formal and informal interviews, the production of drawings, surveys, and mappings, and the development of a first-hand understanding of mainly the city of Havana. The research has indeed focused on the Cuban capital, although most of the considerations developed can provide a feasible perspective to read a reality overcoming Havana’s limits.

Even though the dynamics related to the reification of the economical changes on the built environment and their spatial consequences on the urban level constituted the main corpus of the investigation, several research questions have been taken into consideration during its development. All of them contributed to develop a deeper understanding of the object of study and of its multiple entanglements, re-establishing their importance during the propositional phase which followed the research.

- If architecture reflects society and its conflicts, and society shapes architecture according to its logics, what can be considered as the architecture of the Cuban Revolution? In which ways, probably subtle and not easily perceiveable, is the Revolution exerted within the built environment?
- What are the architectural and urban features of the ‘collective machines’ - external services representative of collectivism completing the individual dwelling unit ? - In which ways did they metabolize existing buildings and how have they been embedded within the city of Havana?
- The appearance and spatial arrangement of Havana is currently reconfigured to allow for isolated global spaces to support isolated socialist spaces. How do these overlapped cities work? What is their spatial framework (borders, thresholds, links...)? What is the rationale behind the elements which characterize these synchronic realms?
- How does the adjustment of the socialist economic model affect the built environment? How does it change it?
Which are the dynamics that this adjustment is already implying and which ones will it foster?
In our understanding the City can be seen as the product of conflicting sociopolitical forces, or the expression of the dialectics of hegemonic-subaltern relations, also readable as State-society relations. Once applied to Havana, this lens disclosed a further interesting facet: here the hegemonic power has always attempted to impose its will through the spatial articulation of the city mainly by means of protocols, i.e. systems of rules, codes and laws, acting beyond any form of design, neglecting if not obliterating this tool.

Since its birth, Havana’s elites have undertaken a process of organization and definition of urban spaces mainly through a descriptive practice: even the IV book of the ‘Leyes de Indias’ - where creation and development of Spanish colonial settlements were regulated - constitutes an act of ‘projecting’ which avoids any form of pre-established design by simply tracing, through text, the guidelines for a good positioning and functioning of the elements supporting the social, political and economical infrastructure.

The juridical text embodies thus the real mean through which the City is attempted to be shaped: every single ordinance concurs for the realization of a certain political project.

In response to the protocols attempting to ‘canalize everyday life’, to use Michel Foucault’s terminology, inhabitants develop ‘tactics’, borrowing De Certeau’s definition, resisting hegemonic impositions.

It is interesting to note how it is mainly the existence of anomalies within the protocols, to allow the development of oppositional ‘tactics’ leading to the production of what is definable as contested spaces: clandestine spatial practices which challenge the legislation through their mere existence.

As ‘tactics’ are constantly reinvented and reassessed, protocols change and adapt as well, even if at a slower pace, in order to actualize themselves following endogenous and exogenous pressures. When these adjustments are made to absorb, control and canalize the existing ‘tactics’, the contested spaces turn into something definable as contradictory spaces: although their assimilation within the legislative framework, the very nature of these spaces continues to represent a contradiction within the hegemonic structure, showing the inability or impossibility of a dominant space to suppress or negate entirely the diversity and difference within its bounds.

Among all the measures constituting the ‘update of the Cuban socialist model’, one in particular has been analyzed using this theoretical framework: _cuentapropismo_ (self-entrepreneurship). This aspect has been chosen not only because of its crucial role in the redefinition of many spatial and non-spatial realities or for the fact that its presence is palpable - even though not yet studied by our discipline - on the streets of every Cuban city, but also because the redefinition of the productive worker and the renegotiation of its citizenship can foster possible speculations transcending the boundaries both of the Caribbean island and of the socialist system.

As a retrospective methodological reflection I can affirm that the lens chosen to undertake the research has constituted an interesting perspective tool allowing interesting speculations. The City can be in fact seen as the product of conflicting sociopolitical forces and the factors shaping its reality are frequently unpredictable, contradictory, and bottom-up as well as top-down.
Research-project relation

Originating from spatial, built or discursive issues, the engagement of architectural practice goes beyond the mere act of construction, transcending the dichotomy problem-solution to enter a continuous process of questioning the complexity of cultural dynamics.

The architectural project thus, besides being an investigative and critical device able to condense and metabolize cultural contradictions, is a tool capable to catalyze and propel a certain discourse through the envision of new and even provocative spaces.

Although it is embraceable that “architecture is not just about making good buildings; it’s about insuring that the proper conditions exist to make good buildings”, this thought should be enhanced by the definition of what architecture is. E. L. Boullée asserted that “one must conceive in order to make. [...] This production of the mind, this creation is what constitutes Architecture.” A further conceptualization of the autonomy of this immaterial production - inescapable premise to the material one - not only allows for a reconsideration of what the ‘proper conditions to make good buildings’ are - opening to the possibility of using the tools of other fields of knowledge - but fosters as well a critical rethinking of the idea relating to ‘the building’ as the product of architecture.

For sure it is not ‘a building’ what Havana needs. Furthermore, consistently with the position just explained, the proposal of intervention does not merely seek to respond to such needs. On the contrary it wants to constitute a critical laboratory capable to challenge a series of conditions/dynamics, while redefining the role of architect as an organizer and as an active actor of culture and political thinking.

As broadly illustrated through the research, Cuba is experiencing a phase of substantial change. Borrowing Michel Marié’s consideration from a different reality, one could observe referring to the Cuban dynamics that it is within these “out of the ordinary” contexts that: “models and concepts that were until that moment not conceivable or appropriable suddenly leave the domain of utopia”. Moreover, it must be considered that this country is in itself an ‘out of the ordinary context’, both being one of the few socialist nations not having significantly implemented a rethinking of the socialist model until this recent shift, and facing the limitations in its external economic relations generated by the U.S. embargo.

Hence the intervention strategy aims to develop this kind of ‘models and concepts’, far from merely proposing solutions, but rather revealing and criticizing the actual idiosyncratic adjustment of the economic model in a proactive way.

More specifically an organizational strategy is proposed, in order to reconfigure the structure of cuentapropismo - experiencing a booming diffusion - as an individual contribution to the collective.

Within the strategy developed I focused my attention on the design of one of the three engines of the intervention. The manzana (urban block) can act as a cooperative (special investments could be granted to entire blocks or to segments in order to incentivize their conversion), on the one hand maximizing its productivity and on the other hand intensifying the already present self-support networks. Within this system, using the same logics acting on the manzana as a consequence of liberalizations, the shrinkage of the most intimate domestic core is exacerbated, allowing both an increase of the productive space and the appearance of a third sphere. This sphere allows the extension of the socialist space to a domain previously not fully absorbed, by the overcoming of a ‘bourgeois’
conception of dwelling. The new infrastructure, obtained by the subtraction of servant spaces and their organic union, acts as a border capable to propel a dialectic relation between the individual realm and the community. This intervention affects the very fundamental element of the colonial mansions of Habana Vieja: the wall of medianeria. Furthermore, the urban voids created by the multiple collapses corroding the city, vestiges filled up with cars of rickshaws, are absorbed in the new spatiality, transforming one of the most unsettling heritages of the Revolution in decompression spaces capable of a great potential power, through the provision of shared collective facilities.