This grant from the Tinker Foundation supported my month-long field study of the housing market in Old Havana, Cuba. I conducted both qualitative and quantitative research, to explore the degree to which Cuba’s recent market-based housing reforms are altering the character of Old Havana by creating new gentrification pressures that reinforce class- and race-based inequalities in Cuban society.

On November 3, 2011, the government of Cuban President Raul Castro announced it would allow some forms of private property. Law 288, as it is known, committed the Cuban government to 'apply flexible formulas for the exchange, purchase, sale, and rental of housing so as to facilitate solutions to the housing needs of the population.' This law opened a potential source of capital to the 84% of households that own their homes. Despite widespread agreement in Cuba about the need to loosen restrictions on the real estate market, there are concerns about implementation and its consequences. The most important issues in implementation relate to affordability, prices, speculation and the source of funds for purchases. The consequences could be that the socio-economic makeup of this urban space changes after 50 years of stagnancy.

Founded about 1519 on Cuba’s north-western shore, Old Havana has maintained a remarkable unity of character through its adherence to its original urban layout. Due not only to its prime location at the harbor entrance, but also to its remarkable architecture, history, landmarks, Old Havana is the most visited neighborhood for tourists who visit Havana. Old Havana was designated a World Heritage Site in 1982. This neighborhood was also chosen due to an interesting urban development project run by the state there. This 20-year old experiment in urban planning and historic preservation has essentially revitalized a decaying historic center without displacing its poor and working class population. Now, the question is whether Cuba’s recent market-based housing and economic reforms are changing neighborhoods like Old Havana.

This survey was inspired by a series of articles by Mario Coyula, an architect in Havana. He
believes that Cuba's changing real estate laws will accelerate a trend already under way, “The city's newer and more upscale neighborhoods, such as Old Havana, will shoot up in value, and poorer Cubans will move south, further inland.” Coyula predicts that wide-scale buying and selling will lead to a “huge rearrangement” in Havana and other cities as the wealthy move to better areas. He and others said it would inevitably exacerbate class conflict. This project attempted to capture the validity of this prediction and thus add to existing literature on the affect of privatization on socio-spatial urban relations.

This research was conducted via one-on-one interviews and surveys with individuals selling property, for-sale-by-owner, in Old Havana. The surveys captured quantifiable data as to the types of homes being sold, the reason for selling and the seller's future housing plans. The interviews then captured qualitative information as to the seller's perspective on changing socio-spatial dynamics within their neighborhood. In addition to basic information about the property being sold, such as number of bedrooms and bathrooms, the survey also recorded demographic characteristics of individuals selling. These interviews all took place in the properties listed for sale so that reported property information could be verified by myself.

A summary in graphs of most of the quantitative survey data collected can be found at the end of this document (in Spanish). This paragraph will attempt to highlight key information captured additionally in interviews and observations. The degree to which houses are subdivided, in which rooms sectioned off with both vertical and horizontal barriers, is truly astounding- the consequence of 50 years of being unable to sell homes and move. Thus, most people were hoping to sell a relatively larger property for a couple smaller properties to assume greater privacy and independence. Despite the economic and political reforms sweeping the island, the majority of residents intended to use the money for selling their properties to leave the country or to help a family member leave. It seems that the major demographic of people hoping to move into Old Havana are residents from Eastern Cuba. The establishment of a community from Eastern Cuba within Old Havana encourages this migration by
helping in the provision of housing and employment. This is especially true in the poorer areas of Old Havana, farther from the port. Not surprisingly, the areas closest to the historic plazas and port which have already undergone renovations, are where residents are attempting to sell at the highest prices. Proximity to these restored areas has a direct effect on not only the asking price of these properties, but the maintenance of the spaces as well. This pattern could inform the city about the impact their historical renovation projects are having on socio-economic patterns in Old Havana. Of course, due to the limited nature of this project, further study is needed.

Only by understanding the changing socio-spatial dynamics of this area can governmental, public and private institutions respond with appropriate policy and action so as to ensure a fair and sustainable urban landscape. I am grateful to the Tinker Foundation and the Stone Center for providing me with the opportunity for this unique opportunity.

2. ¿Qué tipo de propiedad está vendiendo?

Results based on 22 responses to this question
4. Aproximadamente, ¿cuántos metros cuadrados es?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 40.91% (9) 50-100
- 27.27% (6) 101-150
- 27.27% (6) <50
- 4.55% (1) >150
5. ¿Cuántas habitaciones tiene?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 40.91% (9) 2
- 22.73% (5) 3
- 18.18% (4) 1
- 13.64% (3) 4+
- 4.55% (1) -- No Answer --

6. ¿Cuántos baños tiene?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 63.64% (14) 1
- 27.27% (6) 2
- 4.55% (1) -- No Answer --
- 4.55% (1) 4+

7. Es esta propiedad actualmente su residencia principal?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 95.45% (21) Yes
- 4.55% (1) No
In the case of #14. “Otro” meant “the same”.
15. ¿Las mismas personas que viven con usted ahora, van a estar en el siguiente espacio?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 72.73% (16) lo mismo
- 18.18% (4) menos
- 9.09% (2) -- No Answer --

16. ¿Adónde vas a moverse?

Results based on 22 responses to this question

- 54.55% (12) -- Other --
- 13.64% (3) en Cuba, pero no en Habana
- 13.64% (3) Habana Vieja
- 9.09% (2) Centro
- 4.55% (1) San Miguel
- 4.55% (1) Otro País