

# COLOMBIA > CUBA

## INTERVIEWEE: ODLAN YER HERNÁNDEZ DE LARA



**Historical and urban archaeology can be seen on every street in Cuba and arguably every city in the country, it can be said, for example, all Old Havana is an architectural archaeology site. What is Cuba's strategy to look after and cope with a large number of archaeological sites and respond to the demands of international protocols regarding the conservation of world heritage sites?**

There is no Cuban national strategy for Archaeology. Since authorities do not look at each historical building as an archaeological site, it seems like it is not necessary to establish protocols to monitor or prevent archaeological impacts. This is one of the difficulties of the preservation of the Cuban archaeological heritage. Cuba does not manage historical heritage like other countries (i.e. United States, Argentina) who establish a temporality (50 or 100-year-old) to consider a site or building as historical.

Cuban Heritage is established by declaration; if the site has not been declared as a historical site/building, then there is no official recognition. However, all provinces have a Heritage Office, which defines historical districts, although it does not necessarily involve a protection system, they monitor architectural structures. But there are certain local strategies from institutions and research groups that provide some insight to cope with the archaeological sites. The cities declared as World Heritage sites have archaeological research groups with local strategies. Old Havana is the best example. The Oficina del Historiador de La Habana (Havana Historian Office) has an Archaeological Section (Gabinete de Arqueología) with several research groups to work just in Old Havana, although they run parallel projects outside Old Havana. Since all construction work done in Old Havana has to be run by the companies that belong to the same institution, and there exists an urban plan for the city's restoration and preservation, every single building needs to be investigated by an archaeologist before development. However, this strategy focuses on the architectural restoration, and archaeology is seen as a complement. Gabinete de Arqueología has a preventive program that also focuses on those critical archaeological sites that need priority, and some research projects follow this strategy. In some (several) restored buildings, the archaeological investigations led to important features or evidence exhibited as part of the new uses of the spaces, many times related to the historical use of the building.

A similar, but not similarly supported strategy exists in cities like Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus, Holguin, and Cienfuegos. Research groups and institutions work together to provide a better understanding of our past. However, these politics work only for World Heritage sites, with a few exceptions. A very different perspective is used in other cities, where the possibilities are not the same, with scarce to no resources to protect the archaeological heritage. Even worse, some places have no inventory of what they have, which makes it even more complicated to protect it. Even when there are two laws to protect heritage in general, the implementation is not as we expect, many times because of the lack of resources to do it. A new law is in the works that will address and try to resolve some of these problems.

However, maybe one of the biggest problems we have regarding these issues is the lack of educational formation. Since there are no specific university programs for archaeology or anthropology, the results are evident in practice. Some researchers have had the opportunity to do postgraduate studies outside Cuba, but this is not enough because the learning process is not continuous, and the new generations have no orientation, incentive or interest. This view may seem pessimistic, but there are a few people trying to change the actual situation with local strategies, and trying to extend positive results to other cities, reinforced through courses, coursework, and teamwork. Some results have been accomplished, but there is still much work to do.

### **What are the main challenges of archaeological practice in Cuba today and which ones, considering the unique political and cultural history of the Cuban Revolution?**

The main challenges of archaeology in Cuba for the next decades can be separated in, at least, three points: 1) university career development, 2) theoretical diversification, and 3) dealing with the preservation of the archaeological heritage.

Probably the main challenge of Cuban archaeology is the lack of a university education and career development, aforementioned. Even when Science, in general, received a strong support after the Cuban Revolution with the creation of several institutions and economic support to run research projects and publications, it was not possible to generate a university program in archaeology or anthropology. The consequences can be seen in the results and contributions of archaeological research, suggesting is not a priority to the society. Archaeological institutions do not play a significant role on the political agenda.

Moreover, the lack of a university education and specialization has a significant impact on the theoretical background. Since the Cuban government decided in 1961 to follow a Marxist approach, there is no discussion about the theoretical background in archaeology. Even worst, that provided the basis to a general ignorance of what was happening in the rest of the World, or sometimes full rejection because it came from a Capitalist country or model. Without discussion, Cuban archaeology was attached to an orthodox Marxism, but in practice, archaeology was more similar to a Culture-Historical approach, following the 1950's influence. In the last years, some lights are changing the panorama, but there are still some proposals for a unique theoretical vision. That is why an opening for a diverse theoretical agenda is needed. Gradually, although it is not explicit, some changes have taken place.

Interconnected are the new changes in the political scenario, where potential construction developments can worsen the current status of archaeological heritage. Today, the main archeological institutions do not have enough support to provide an effective protection of the known archaeological heritage. Since there are no strategies to involve archaeologists in environmental impact studies, the archaeological heritage is in a critical status. Several archaeological sites have been impacted by development related with the tourism industry, sometimes irreversibly. If we do not prepare for a potentially worse scenario, the impact will be devastating. Nevertheless, even when this situation changes, we will return to the first problem: there are not enough archaeologist to cope with the actual development in the tourism industry, so what can we do if the situation changes with a potentially bigger investment in infrastructure? That's where the university career gets in action, not just creating more professional archaeologist, but establishing a professional status for archaeology with a strong theoretical background that provides the needed tools to deal with the new scenarios. In 2010, 65 archaeologists were on the National List of Professional Archaeologist. This year the List had a decrease to 59 archaeologists. Since several of those archaeologists do not run archaeological projects, the situation worsens.

### **Does the public have a different appreciation of the importance pre-Columbian and colonial archaeological sites?**

This question has different answers, mostly depending on the locations. Some areas, like Holguin province, has a strong pre-Columbian sense of awareness, with a general society identification with the pre-Columbian heritage. There, the colonial archaeological sites are not as recognized as the pre-Columbian sites. However, Old Havana can be seen as the opposite, where colonial heritage presence is so strong, and archaeological investigations are a focus on that heritage. However, I could risk the generalization that pre-Columbian archaeological heritage is more recognizable than colonial archaeological heritage, but this should be proven statistically, with a representative sample, that

presently does not exist. For example, on museum collection, curators inventory pre-Columbian archaeological evidence within the archaeological collection, whereas, historical archaeological evidence is housed within historical collections, along with documents and other objects. It can be said that there is a predominant lack of interest for more ephemeral, local archaeological sites, with interest focused only on monumental and sensational sites discovered elsewhere. That is a view that can be found in the newspapers, with more presence of outside archaeological events than local news. Almost ten years ago, a project began to revoke and alleviate this situation, and positively promote Cuban and Caribbean archaeology. The Website Cuba Arqueológica ([www.cubaarqueologica.org](http://www.cubaarqueologica.org)) has changed the way Cuban archaeology was and is seen, providing free access to inaccessible publications, and current developments in all field of archaeology in Cuba and the rest of the Caribbean.

### **How does Cuba build capacity for minority groups to get involved in archaeology and museums?**

There are several strategies to involve society, in general, both in archaeology and museum research-preservation. I do not refer to minority groups because Cuba does not have an established policy to discriminate social groups, and that does not happen in practice. As I mentioned before, the strategies come from research groups and institutions in a local perspective. Cuba has at least one museum per municipios (county or municipalities), and every museum develops several activities that involve schools, inviting them to participate in activities or creating activities for them. Also, the museum goes to the schools to talk about different topics related to the museum collections, local histories, and beyond. Those activities are also open to the public, especially for neighbors. One strategy is what is called Círculos de Interés (Interests Groups), that provide specific areas of knowledge to students, led by professionals. That is not just for Museums, but for different institutions. Archaeology has been one of these interest groups. Those Interest groups are proposed to the school, for an appropriate age range, and the students are invited to participate. Those interested, join a team that starts working on practical classes, site visits, etc. Interest Groups also work as a future career motivation, where students know what is done in a specific profession. Some institutions also open their doors for school visits, to learn the professions from the professionals. Of course, there are also summer courses, and summer activities like Rutas y Andares (Routes and Walks), offered by the Havana Historian Office: a tour lead by a professional to discover sites with exhibits or where they have worked. Those tours have been a real success, where people get involved with their local heritage. Archaeology is part of those tours, with an archaeologist guiding visits to archaeological sites, sometimes with work in progress, archaeological exhibits in restored historical buildings, and several histories resulting from the archaeological investigations. Those tours have been done in other cities, with a similar success.

### **About Odlanyer:**

I'm creator and Editor for both *Cuba Arqueológica* Journal and Web Site ([www.cubaarqueologica.org](http://www.cubaarqueologica.org)), which is a long term project to diffuse the archaeological knowledge from Cuba and the Caribbean. I'm currently working in South Florida archaeology, with a CRM company, and at the same time, running some projects in Cuba. One of my projects is related with the Spanish-Cuban-American War (1898), in the scenario of the first battle. A second project is related with the colonial fortress Castillo de San

Severino, including archaeological excavations, but also working to get better the museum exhibits and engaging the community in the cultural heritage preservation ([www.arqueologiaydesarrollo.org](http://www.arqueologiaydesarrollo.org)).

[www.cubaarqueologica.org](http://www.cubaarqueologica.org), [www.arqueologiaydesarrollo.org](http://www.arqueologiaydesarrollo.org)

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