

David Creedon | Behind Open Doors

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For the most part tourists who visit Cuba only ever get to see their hotel or the beach resorts, they photograph the old American cars and the women with the big cigars who pose for tips on the *Melancon*, for them this is Cuba. For me Cuba can be found in places where tourists never visit, in the backstreets of Havana with all its hustle and bustle and the noise of city life and in the countryside on small farms is where one will witness the interactions of family life. For Cubans the family is a very important aspect to their lives. The portraits from this series document the citizens of Havana in their home environment and capture scenes that are reflective of their character not normally seen. The photographs were taken in various districts of Havana over a six-week period and during my time on the project I became aware that these people still retain family values and a richness of life that would appear to be disappearing in the more affluent western societies. Families are tight knit groups as they share rooms or houses in close proximity. Rooms can be quite small and are in contrast on some occasions to the relatively more grandiose old colonial structures. Family units often consist of grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, teens and children. They support each other in such a way as to create a culture of

emotional trust and security. The concept of family and extended family is also expanded into the community where everyone helps each other and this mutual co-operation became more evident as I began to spend more time among the people.

One of the first images I took for the series was of Maria and Raul. Their apartment is on the Paso Marti in Central Havana and faces the El Capitolio building whose design is based on the US Capitol building in Washington DC and the Pantheon in Paris. The climb to the fourth floor is exhausting as the temperature outside is close to forty degrees Celsius. When we arrive at the one room apartment Raul is sitting on a rocking chair and his wife Maria is asleep on the bed. This compact room contains all their possessions. They were married in 1959, the year of the revolution. They have lived for most of their lives in this tiny apartment in Central Havana. Raul is now blind and Marie spends much of her time looking after his needs. It is now late afternoon and Marie takes a siesta while Raul sits in his rocking chair waiting for her to wake up. The room is quite dark which suits me. For the six-second exposure I had to wedge something under the rocking chair to prevent movement. Maria never woke up for the hour I had spent with them and only became aware of the photograph when I returned four weeks later to show it to her.

Out in the suburbs of Havana is the district of Playa. I arrive at the home of Paula Herrera Almendarez who is 105 years old, the house is large and there are five generations of her family living there. When I arrived to take her photograph she is busy preparing the family's evening meal, she then goes to change and we take a few photographs. I have included a walker for her to hold on to only because I want to keep her steady for the one-second exposure. When we finished she then changed to her old cloths and continued with the preparation of the evening meal. She invited me to stay for dinner and tells me she is going to be on television later on to discuss her life. What is amazing about Paula is how healthy and active she is; in fact Cubans are extremely healthy and have access to one of the best medical services in the world. At the dinner table there are six of us and even though I don't speak Spanish they spoke in English as not to exclude me from the conversation. For me I felt like a long lost relative who they hadn't seen in years. In fact this was how I felt in all the homes I visited. Cubans are not rich but their generosity in sharing what they have with a stranger is something that is rarely found in more prosperous societies.

Like all major cities around the world apartments in the city centre are small, sometimes they are converted hotels but as you get out into the suburbs and rural area the living spaces get much larger. With the population of Havana at over two million there is a shortage of living space and during the 1990's economic crisis there was an increase in migration to the city, as a result the government introduced a law regulating migration to Havana in order to keep the pressure off the housing sector. Another problem is the condition of the buildings especially in Central and Old Havana. With most over 100 years old, exposure to the elements such as high humidity, termites and the effects of sea air coupled with lack of maintenance and shortages have all played a part in the deterioration of the housing stock.

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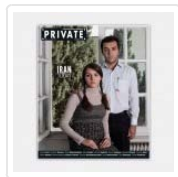
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