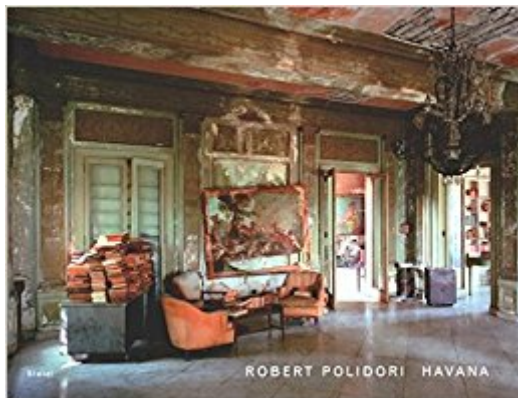


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Robert Polidori: Havana



Synopsis

Robert Polidori, often considered an architectural photographer, is in fact a photographer of habitat. On the surface his subjects are buildings, but at the core his lens is focused on the remnants and traces of living he finds scattered in hallways, left in back rooms and worn on facades. His spectacular color photographs are presented here in an appropriately oversized volume that capture both their monumentality and their attention to detail. Havana is a particularly rich setting for Polidori's inquiries. The curves and columns that line the streets refer to past eras and speak of the political, social and economic forces that have driven the city to its present condition. Through his rigorous and sensitive examination--facilitated by a sense of color and composition that makes his photographs feel like vivid memories--Polidori delicately peels away the patina of daily living and reveals the juxtapositions that create a city's identity. His photographs define the idea of faded grandeur. In this city the peddler lives where the countess once resided; children dance and tumble where merchants conducted their business. Each photograph is a discovery and a fragment of the city's biography.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Robert Polidori's Havana is a haunting city of sherbet colors and peeling stucco, grand colonial architecture in decay, and real people who hang their laundry across a lofty foyer in an old mansion. Polidori's photographs, which fill the pages of this beautiful, oversized book, appear without comment, yet it is impossible to miss the affection and melancholy of his highly personal vision.

...it's a lyrical romantic quality founded on fact, not just sweet romantic sentiment... -- The New York Times, August 23, 2001 --William L. Hamilton chronicles the faded grandeur of Cuba's crumbling colonial architecture. -- Elms Street, September 2001

There's a phrase that a lot of musical artists use to describe their works when it's dark and emo, 'beautiful mistake', 'beautiful tragedy', 'beautiful decay', etc. I don't 'feel' it all the time, but I 'get' it. It's an artful description. In this case, the images off of these pages are absolutely beautiful. I don't mean rainbows and sparkly things, stars and neon lights, or national geographic front cover. I mean beautiful like looking at another person's eyes and seeing their culture through their bone structure. If I lost you, let me try to take you where I'm getting. Have you been to a museum of arts and wondered why is this art and why this artist instead of any other? I think that too. Then I start to get a closer look and ask different questions like why did the artist mix these colors in, why is the brush stroke in that direction? Were these mistakes or luck, or was everything put in its right place? That's the questions that I ask when I'm looking at this book. How is everything so perfect? The aging of paint on the walls, the discoloration on the sofa, the mold on the ceiling, all come together in each page and is captured so colorful and easy. Each page is something that you'd want to hang on your wall and show yourself everyday an example of how mother nature paints over the things that man makes. And it all takes place in a culturally embraced setting called Havana which makes it even more wonderful.

There are two principal cities in the world where time seems to stand still. One is Pripjat' Ukraine which was abandoned following the Chernobyl disaster in April, 1986. In that unfortunate time literally all the people left within 24 hours. The other is Havana whose middle and upper classes departed over several decades following the Cuban Revolution mainly to live in the United States. Unlike Pripjat' where vegetation and wildlife replaced human inhabitants, the City of Havana lives on despite its painful decay. Robert Polidori's Havana depicts several days in the life of the city in the early years of the new century. Probably by chance, the period he photographed represented simultaneously the zenith and nadir of the Revolution. His camera details the architectural heritage of the colonial era set among the blockish facades of Socialist reality. Even as neglect defaces these urban jewels, a certain spirit shines through recalling a city whose exiles in Florida still yearn to return. As we enter the last days of the Cuban experiment in our hemisphere, the Havana so lovingly pictured here will not endure. Buildings and homes will be restored naturally enough. But

the spirit of the urban caretakers of this legacy might have been lost forever if not for Polidori's lens. This is an amazing and dreamy work that belongs to a city and people whose heritage stayed behind.

Knowing that I will never be able to travel to Havana I wanted to get some idea of the city. I especially appreciated the facing pages that showed the building in disrepair and then after having been restored. The colors used in both interiors and exteriors are generally beautiful. The photos many times seem more like paintings. The book has exterior shots, interior shots and portraits of residents of the city. I would have appreciated more context. Did the lady of the house always live there? Were all those books hers? Or were they left by a previous occupant? How was it possible for some residents to maintain their homes so beautifully in spite of the Cuban economic difficulties? I especially noticed that the traditional architecture was so much more graceful and beautiful than the huge hotel overshadowing everything. Is that the future of Havana? More huge tourist hotels looming above the old city and the people? Actually, the whole sad story of the decay of beauty reminded me of Detroit.

There are so many Havanas - the city of enduring propagandists, the city of opportunistic tourist hawks, the city of irrepressible enthusiasts, and the city of melancholy preeners. Polidori takes on the last of these and does a beautiful job of showing splendor glimpsed through weary eyes - dilapidated buildings that beg to be honored again after many years of noble, yet thankless service; vintage autos standing like senile guards before crumbling facades; paint deprived, yet elegant interiors that suggest any number of richly layered stories. It's all here. And it makes you both nostalgic and hopeful. How often can you stand on a seam of history, seeing the past, the present and a possible future all at once? Then why not five stars? Polidori spends a bit too much time in each location. I don't really need to see every room in someone's house to get a feel for it....especially if that means there will be other locations that I don't get to see at all. Public places are presented on the sidelines (by design), but I don't believe that that was the best strategy. Public places are more than mere architecture - they too have stories to tell, moods to convey, dreams to share. I wish Mr Polidori would offer a website to owners of his book who wish to see the other photos that did not make the cut for publication. Then, the journey would feel more complete.

Being Cuban American and having visited Havana numerous times as well as having the opportunity to actually see firsthand, many of these grand interiors Polidori so eloquently displays

for all to page through and imagine the events that have transpired in these interiors. The joys, the struggles, the rise and fall of a culture with all it's social graces. This book captures what I captured with my own eyes passing through those marvelous mansions of Cuba's golden age. Havana is truly a Paris of the Caribbean, although decayed and damaged, she is still beautiful, graceful and inspirational to all who visit her. Thus the term "Havana-itis", a disease thought to befall visitors who fall instantly in love with the grand ole dame. I believe there is still hope for her to be restored to her rightful brilliance one day, If only the current government would allow it.

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