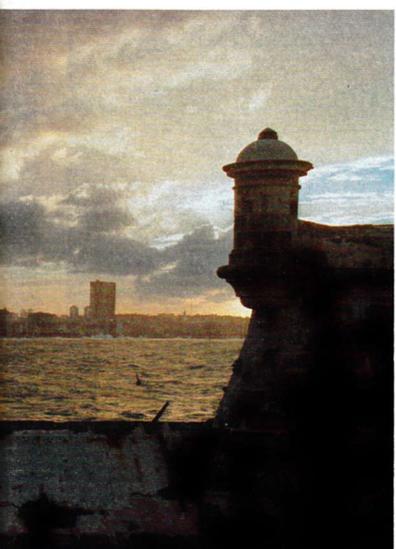




CITY OF SECRETS

Cut off socially, historically and politically from the rest of the world, Havana has a compelling aura that has always exerted a magnetic pull for photographers. Robert Polidori's new book perfectly captures the dilapidated glamour of a city caught in a time warp. By **Philip Watson**



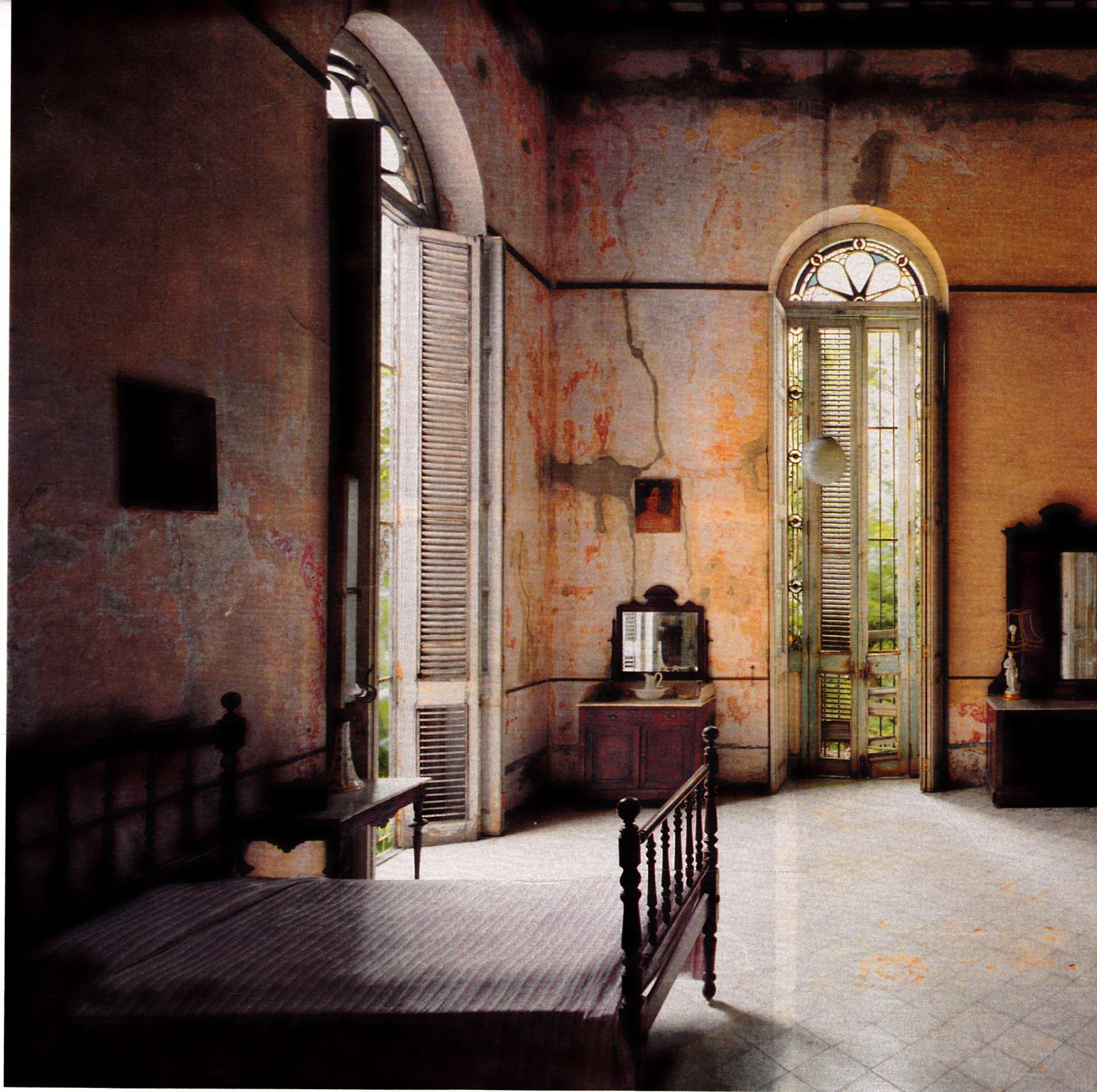


Robert Polidori describes himself as a photographer of habitat. It sounds grandiose, even fanciful, but his sensitive eye for uncovering what lies beneath the surface of a room or building, and the mysterious beauty of his compositions, have established him as one of the leading photographers of his generation. He is a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* and his award-winning work hangs in major museums. He is far, far more than a snapper of architecture and interiors.

‘A lot of pure architectural photography is about glamour – it’s a form of product or beauty photography which renders a building as attractive as possible,’ says Polidori. ‘I’m more interested in how people actually use and inhabit a space and what that says about their personal values and choices. I’m interested in the sociology, psychology, even the archaeology of a space, in trying to add another dimension.’

Polidori is a sharp-talking, boldly intellectual 50-year-old French-Canadian living in New York, a former avant-garde filmmaker whose brash self-confidence and measured pronouncements stand in contrast to the quiet lyricism of his photographs. He has taken richly imaginative shots of the ruins of the Chernobyl-4 reactor, of empty snipers’ nests in Beirut and of the elaborate restoration of the Palace of

Main picture, the house of Senora Faxas, an elderly Spanish noblewoman, in the Miramar district. Top, a bedroom in the Faxas house. Above, Edificio Focsa, in Vedado. Left, a view of Havana from the Castillo del Morro

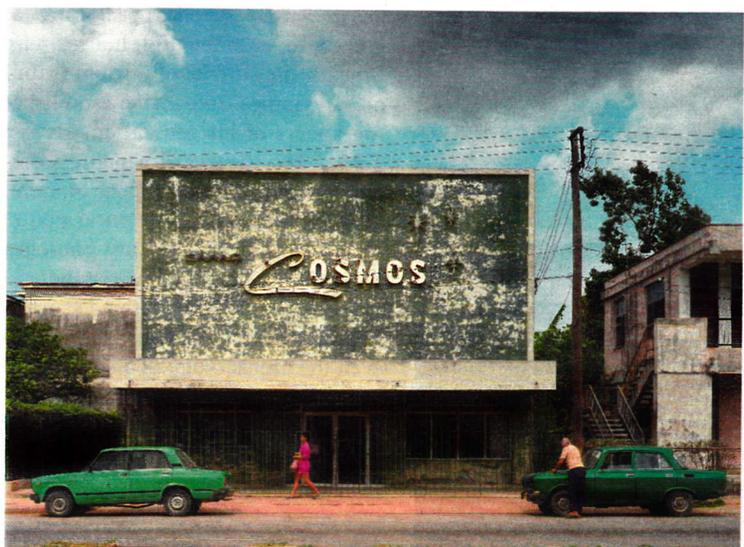


Versailles. Yet few of his photographs can match the oblique poignancy and poetry of his latest collection, published this month.

Havana is a series of around 130 photographs that graphically illustrate both the intense physical decay and tragic splendour of the Cuban capital. Portraying a wide range of buildings and their inhabitants – from workers who have taken over the former home of a countess, to utilitarian modern housing blocks and dilapidated cinemas and ballet schools – Polidori seems to delicately peel away the patina of history to reveal the hidden identity of the city. In *Havana*, it is an identity largely made up of traces, remnants and memories.

‘The book is a monograph, it is my view of Havana, and I think it is mostly about how time stamps its own victory,’ he says. ‘What happens in Havana, and in the *Havana* book, is not exactly that time has stood still, but that it has got frozen from the life of the present. It has got cut off socially, historically and politically – but not, of course, naturally. Havana is a tropical city that suffers from hurricanes and heavy rains and these buildings show the many signs of water damage. The city is caught in a natural time warp.’

Some of the most potent examples of this degradation are to be found





in Polidori's pictures of the grand neo-classical home of Senora Faxas, an 88-year-old Spanish noblewoman. Born in Barcelona, she moved to her house in the Miramar district of Havana in 1942 and has lived there ever since. Unable or unwilling to repair the house, she has let it gloriously decline, the villa becoming a kind of metaphor for her passive resistance to Castro and the Revolution. Her home is neat and tidy and its beauty remains intact, but there is a sense of loss.

'I try to put paradoxes and contradictions into the photographs, so that an image can say many different things,' says Polidori. 'For example, in Senora Faxas's salon there are old books piled on top of a modern-looking desk and not in the bookcase you can see through the door. Why is that, and how long have the books been there, and were they ever on the bookshelf? And was the rip in the painting on the wall made by a knife or a tear? Most of the room is in slow decay, but that painting has been damaged quickly.'

In the introduction to the book, Cuban architecture writer Eduardo Luis Rodriguez frames it as being 'the story of the other Havana, the real Havana'. He is alluding to the city that lies behind the myths and popular images of the Buena Vista Social Club, luxury cigars, sensuous

Main picture, the home of Mercedes Alfonso, in the Vedado neighbourhood. Top, the screening room of the Grand Theatre in Old Havana. Above, the ballet school and national centre for gymnastics in Old Havana. It was formerly the Merchants Association. Far left, the Cosmos cinema in the Playa district. Left, the Florida cinema, in the Santos Suárez neighbourhood



women, defiant communist slogans, and a joyous, spontaneous people. Polidori's view is certainly far removed from the elegantly porticoed plazas and restored palaces and theatres of the colonial Old Town, declared a United Nations World Heritage site in 1982, where most tourists explore. In that respect, the book is a political one, although Polidori confesses he'd be hard-pressed to locate its exact ideological centre. 'I'm not anti-Castro – he's had some positive psychological and spiritual effects on the country – but he is basically letting the living conditions of his people degrade,' he says. 'Maybe Castro's preserved his ideology, but he has not preserved his physical assets. Really, I don't get it: if Castro's so smart how come he lets all this stuff rot?'

As the largest city in the Caribbean and one with a 500-year history, Havana is alive with painterly potential, with the faded ambers and weathered ochres of its neglected buildings, with the verdigris and dirty romanticism of a once elegant city, and with a warm Caribbean light that seems to illuminate the soft-hued pastels from within. Polidori's real achievement is to capture that spirit in a book that is at once sobering and seductive.

Still, I put it to him that, because Havana is so photogenic, so visual, there have already been far too many illustrated books on the city. His reply is characteristically assured: 'Well, that's true, there have been, but I guess I was arrogant – I thought mine would be better.' He is right on both counts.

'Havana' (Steidl, Scalo, distributed by Thames and Hudson, rrp £48) is available to Telegraph readers for £43 plus £1.99 p+p from Telegraph Books Direct. Call 0870-155 7222



Top, the Sarrá pharmacy in the Old Town. Right, not everything is left to rot: before and after photographs of restored facades on the Malecón