Eusebio Leal Spengler is City Historian of Havana, the ‘City of Columns’, as Alejo Carpentier liked to call it. A Doctor of Historical Sciences (University of Havana), he is a specialist in archaeological science and internationally recognised for his work in preserving the historic character of the Cuban capital.

Born in 1942 and self-educated in his youth, Eusebio Leal was a disciple of Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, founder of the Office of the Historian of Havana, the leadership of which Leal assumed in 1967.

The mission of the Historian’s Office is to contribute to the dissemination of Cuban history and culture through ‘the preservation of material and spiritual symbols and expressions of nationality [... and] the collective historical and cultural memory of the city, especially its Historic Centre’, the largest such colonial centre in Latin America.

He is also President of the National Monuments Commission, a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador and a member of the unicameral Cuban Parliament. Since 1981, Leal has been responsible for the restoration and preservation of the Historic Centre of Havana, a national monument since 1976 and a Heritage for Humanity site since 1982.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the advent of the Special Period in Time of Peace, Cuba was plunged into a deep economic crisis. Leal was nonetheless charged with continuing the work of restoring the Historic Centre of the capital, but with severely limited resources. As head of
the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage, a new institution created for this purpose, he managed to obtain a certain degree of autonomy from the authorities in the management of the Office of the Historian but only a limited US$1 million budget.

Nonetheless, Leal has transformed that institution into a veritable economic and cultural network that includes hotels, restaurants, shops, museums and construction and restoration workshops that are capable of generating the funds necessary to preserve the Historic Centre. The results have been spectacular and have earned him worldwide fame. In total, nearly 100 old buildings, for the most part complex structures of great historical importance, have been restored.

Eusebio Leal has also expanded the scope of responsibility of the Office of the Historian. He has brought new energy to the cultural and social life of Old Havana with a multitude of activities, which are held monthly in museums, cultural centres, libraries, research laboratories and elsewhere.

Leal was able to demonstrate that saving the cultural patrimony of the city was possible, even under conditions of extreme economic adversity. The original US$1 million invested generates more than 100 million in resources today. His excellent management abilities and his love for Havana have made his work an undeniable economic and cultural success.

A man of exceptional culture, a winner of the world’s highest honours, he is considered to be one of the three greatest living Cuban speakers, the other two being Fidel Castro and Max Lesnik.

During these conversations, Leal evokes his city and speaks of the level of management autonomy enjoyed by his institution. He addresses the question of relations with the US, economic sanctions, tourism development, socio-economic reforms and the Cuba of tomorrow.

Salim Lamrani (SL): Eusebio Leal, you’re Havana’s historian. What exactly is this city?

Eusebio Leal (EL): Havana is an enormously attractive city. It possesses a magnetism that grows out of its history and its geographical location. It is a beautiful city that appeals to us for numerous reasons. It is not in step with the times and, therefore, has preserved a wide range of values and a unique identity within the heart of Cuban identity itself. Havana has played an important role in the construction of our national identity and our national character, as well as in the struggles for independence and those of students and the working class. This city is also an impressive patrimonial resource. The Cuban Revolution has undoubtedly contributed to Havana having preserved its architectural heritage and the fact that the city has remained substantially unchanged. But this is
only an apparent immobility. When you visit this city, you immediately feel the vibrant life that prevails here, a life that is waiting to be discovered.

**SL:** What is the role of the Office of the Historian of Havana?

**EL:** The first steps taken were to preserve the architectural heritage that was endangered because of its state of disrepair. But we abandoned the conventional framework, that of preserving monuments, and time has convinced us that there can be no patrimonial development without social and community development as well. We also concluded that development was not possible if we failed to take culture into account. It was important to understand culture as an inspirational value, not in an elitist sense, but in its role as a vanguard of change, of transformation and of research on the past and on the future.

**SL:** Could you tell us a bit about the unique economic system in force in Old Havana.

**EL:** At the beginning, everything was quite conventional. We received a budget from the state. Then came a time when we realised that organisations such as UNESCO could participate in the heritage preservation effort. We also set up small international cooperatives whose work we greatly appreciate. One day, someone sent us an envelope with a single peso in it. The money was clearly not of great economic importance, but at the same time the gesture was an act of love for Cuba. All such acts of solidarity are important to us. Sometimes people send us books on architecture, treatises on restoration. All of this is positive, but it would be impossible to preserve our rich heritage and our culture with nothing other than these gestures of solidarity.

**SL:** At what moment did all of this begin?

**EL:** When the crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union occurred, Fidel Castro correctly pointed out that the Old Havana preservation project ought to be achieved through the creation of an autonomous and sustainable management model, one that would be able to generate its own resources while at the same time creating an infrastructure for the tourism that would one day come to Cuba. It was therefore important to establish a twofold mechanism to achieve these goals. The Office of the Historian is an old and prestigious cultural institution that specialised in city themes. It offered a series of conferences, a small assortment of publications, a television and radio programme and a museum, the Museum of Havana. We first gave legal standing to the Office by assuming the responsibility of owning assets. All land and buildings in Old Havana that belonged to the state were turned over to the Office of the Historian. This property proved to be a source of wealth. The banking system then opened a line of credit for the Office of the Historian.
SL: What was the initial budget?
EL: In October 1994, Fidel Castro offered us a grant of US$1 million, a sum that the Republic was able to afford in these times of crisis. We did not have to repay this contribution, but we were required to invest it in a manner that would make us financially independent. Our work would need to be economically and financially self-supporting. We were granted a legal framework and political support, but we had to achieve financial autonomy. Two years later, in 1996, the initial US$1 million had generated the equivalent of US$3 million in resources. Today, 20 years later, that US$1 million generates revenues 100 times greater. These funds are now used not only to restore our city, but also to provide support to the community, solve problems facing it and integrate it into our project. We shared this revenue with our community by creating a great variety of jobs. We also created schools and workshops to train youth and preserve the heritage and cultural memory of Cuba. We managed to free ourselves from the anxiety created by having bank loans loom over us. We take care of the elderly, the disabled and pregnant women, something no other office of heritage restoration anywhere in the world has done. I think of the restoration of Old Havana as a chapter in the history of the Cuban Revolution.

SL: What is the impact of economic sanctions on the preservation of Cuba’s architectural heritage?
EL: We are required to import many construction materials from quite far afield. The wide variety of technology required for restoration, for example, machines for carpentry or blacksmith equipment, could be acquired easily if normal trade relations between Cuba and the US existed as had been the case for centuries.

We have entered a stage of restoration where buildings are not built with wood from Cuban forests, but rather with woods from forests in the US. Pinewood, for example, is impossible to find other than in the US.

At the same time, we have a history of relations with the US. The cities of the southern coast, from Florida to New Orleans, the coast of Alabama, the mouth of the Mississippi have all been closely related to Cuba throughout our history. Moreover, certain elements of the political history of Cuba, certain facts that relate to the struggle for independence, for one reason or another, reside in the US. There are fascinating archives, graves, indeed a collective memory, in such small communities as Key West and Pensacola. All of this is a part of the history of Cuba.

SL: Historically, the US has been a haven for Cubans.
EL: Yes, the US has been the host country for Cuban exiles at different periods of our history. The richest documentation on the first exiles, those who left prior to 1868, as well as those who left after the Cry of Independence, is in the US.
For example, the New York Public Library is a repository for a trove of Cuban correspondence of immense importance, to which we cannot have direct access. It is also impossible to tell the story of Cuba without mentioning the US. Similarly, it is difficult to evoke the history of the US without mentioning Cuba. While Cuba was still a Spanish colony, Cuban troops left Havana to help the US in its war of independence against England. Cuban forces fought in the US and were at Georgetown alongside of George Washington. We need also add that during the civil war in the US, the Port of Havana became a refuge for southerners who repaired their weapons there. Recall that at the time a slave regime also existed in Cuba.

You cannot write the history of American music or describe our musical preferences without mentioning the exchange between our two countries of, for example, rumba and jazz. We also share great artists. Havana was the home away from home for Ernest Hemingway and many other US writers.

If we speak of sport, baseball is the national sport of the nations that were dominated by the US. Moreover, not even an excess of patriotic zeal could change the technical vocabulary of baseball, something that remains in English to this day. It is the same thing for boxing. This is a Roman sport, but it came to us through our relationship with the US.

There exists a marvellous literary, intellectual and personal relationship between our two countries. It is impossible to talk about the history of José Martí, the founding of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, or even Fidel Castro without mentioning the US. The US is a primary point of reference. It is inevitable that we speak about the role played by many US patriots in the struggle for the independence of Cuba. Countless young Americans sacrificed their lives for our country. Many people in the US have raised funds and supported the Cuban cause, thereby opposing the tidal wave of pro-imperial politics that emanates from Washington.

SL: Let’s talk about another subject. What changes has tourism brought to Cuba?
EL: For an island that has been the victim of a blockade for half a century, that has been monitored and demonised, the fact that tourism is developing in Cuba is a slap in the face of the anti-Cuban campaigns and a source of considerable satisfaction for us. We are an island and we need to have an ongoing dialogue with the world that surrounds us. Any attempt to isolate us is a mistake. Any attempt to exclude us is a mistake. Cubans are prepared for this dialogue. It is understandable that during the early development of the tourism process, harassed and besieged as we were by multiple necessities, frictions and complex situations arose. Whoever brings money plays the dominant role in a society in crisis. That goes without saying. But we cannot lock ourselves into a glass
fortress. For these reasons, we support dialogue quite apart from the fact that this creates economic resources essential for Cuba, now especially since a few US citizens are allowed to travel to Cuba, thanks to the more flexible measures taken by the Obama administration. Admittedly, these measures are not what we had expected nor are they those required by the Constitution of the US. But they are, nonetheless, a first step. Recall that Cuba is the only country in the world that US citizens cannot visit freely.

From the tourist perspective, Cuba is the safest place in the world. We are open to tourists from around the world, particularly those from the US for obvious geographical reasons. It is certain that the day when the economic blockade is finally abandoned, hundreds of thousands of tourists from the US will visit our island. Here, we have never burned a single US flag. In Cuba, everyone is well received, scientists, journalists, artists. It is also true that the isolation we suffer, isolation imposed upon us by the US, has allowed us to diversify our circle of friends. People from around the world come to Cuba, from Japan, China, Australia, England. It is only necessary to spend a day strolling about in Old Havana to realise this. These visits help build interesting and fruitful cultural relations.

SL: Cuba is undergoing a period of change, reforming and updating its socio-economic model. What path is Cuba going to follow?
EL: Cuba, a country that has practised solidarity and extended a generous hand to all who struggle and suffer, has the right to choose its own path. We do not betray anyone. We do not owe a debt to anyone. Cuba has freed itself and because of that it enjoys the solidarity of all decent and generous people on earth. I think the best legacy our history has granted us is our desire to be original. The Master, Simón Bolívar, is attributed with having once said, ‘When we do not invent, we deceive ourselves’ (Cuando no inventamos, erramos).

Whenever we are victorious and win one battle, we are inevitably faced with new challenges. But no matter, we are used to that. Change is inevitable. If something stagnates, it perishes. People have the right to correct their own mistakes in the search for truth, in the search for their own path. I am convinced without hesitation that Cuba is moving in the right direction. Obviously, it puts to the test the famous law of unity and struggle between opposites, between those who want to progress and their opponents, between those who want to lift economic sanctions and supporters of this anachronistic policy.

SL: There is also resistance to these changes, including within Cuban society.
EL: Yes, there are people in Cuba who think that the old days were better. But the Revolution must always have its eye trained on the future. This is my firm conviction.
SL: The US justifies its hostility to Cuba because of the human rights situation and the lack of democracy. How do you respond to that?

EL: Demos is one of the finest legacies of Western civilisation. It is surprising to see the US impose Periclean democracy by bombing countries in the Arab world. I believe that in our world, the right to nonconformity is essential. The US refuses to admit this. They want to standardise the world, particularly Cuba, according to their own definition of human rights. Wherever a man raises his hand against a woman, whenever a guardian of the peace oversteps his authority, whenever a person is a victim of injustice, there we see violations of human rights. No country is free from that, absolutely none, and still less those that judge us. The US has the largest prison population in the world and it is in these prisons that many of the worst violations of human rights are committed. We have discovered that men subjected for decades to the torture of death row were actually innocent, their innocence sometimes proven after their execution. In a country that claims the right to act as prosecutor for the entire world, tens of thousands of people are in prison awaiting trial. Its banking and speculative monetary systems have demonstrated a predatory capacity that has ruined decent people. This is a country that sends its children to death in a supposed war against terror. This is a country that is much like the Rome of the third century.

So what can little Cuba hope for? Its merit lies in the fact that it was able to resist. Its merit lies in the fact that it has not been subjugated. What strange power the Cuban people possess!

SL: The US says that the Cuban government is turning its back on the interests of its own people.

EL: We would be the basest of people, the most cowardly, the most mediocre on earth, had we submitted to the tyranny of five decades without rebelling. Our people have risen up on multiple occasions over the past 100 years. First, we rose up against the Spanish army, one of the world’s most seasoned, possessed of a high conception of honour and a determination to fight the rebellion of those they considered their lost children. The war was long and bloody, yet we had secured our freedom before it was sullied by the self-interested intervention of the US, a country that, as José Martí predicted, wished only to subjugate Cuba.

The language of their demands is irreconcilable with our ability to respond. For us, real human rights lie in the fact that within a Latin American society such as ours, when a serious accident occurs, a cyclone, for example, the first to go to the front lines is the head of State. This has been a true since the terrible days of Hurricane Flora. The first to appear on the scene are the leaders of the government. When a natural disaster occurs in Cuba, the army is the first to take to the streets to rescue people and shelter them. Elsewhere, when the same type
of drama occurs, hundreds of people die in the most complete indifference. In Cuba I have never seen police dogs unleashed on protesters or police spraying protesters with water cannons or tear gas. What should we think when we see students brutally assaulted by the police, young people handcuffed, women martyred by the forces of order in Washington, the capital of the US, and elsewhere? What human rights are we talking about? Are there organised mafias here in Cuba as is the case in all of the countries that claim to teach us lessons? Can we compare Cuban young people to the continent’s youth debased by drugs and gangs? Our people are capable of expressing their anger and taking up arms and fighting. We are a passionate people. We are a Hispanic and Latin people and our blood is a mixture of several inheritances.

SL: The Cuban Revolution has never committed an error?
EL: The Cuban Revolution itself, like any real revolution, cannot ignore its own history, cannot ignore the times when it may have made a mistake. For the most part, we are speaking of serious errors committed by individuals. These errors were not committed in the name of an idea, but rather by men or by not coming to grips with an idea.

In Cuba, the salary of women in equivalent jobs is equal to that of men. In Cuba, there are still many people with prejudices, but there is no quota for admission to university. In Cuba, despite all the needs we have, there is not a single child sleeping under a bridge. There is not a single Cuban boy working in our mines. These are real human rights: the right to education, the right to a dignified life, the right to health.

We are judged through a series of parameters. So I go back to the sandy soil of the Holy Land, where Jesus confronted the Pharisees when they tried to stone a woman. And I demand of those who judge us, ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.’ What can the European Union teach us? What can the US teach us? We have conquered no one. We do not have the blood of slaves and that of oppressed Congolese workers on our hands. Cubans went to Africa as liberators and came back bearing coffins that contained the bodies of their fallen comrades. They did not come back loaded down with elephant tusks, gold or diamonds. And when someone tried to implicate us in a matter that was morally and ethically reprehensible, the Revolution was relentless. Here is the truth, or at least, our truth.

SL: What message would you like to send to the people of the US?
EL: We do not have American blood on our hands. We have not killed your people. We have committed no crime. Three of us are unjustly imprisoned in your country for fighting against crime. Yet real US and Russian spies were exchanged at the Vienna Airport only a short time ago. No journalist was
allowed to photograph the scene. We know only that a beautiful woman, a kind of new Mata Hari, was handed over along with her collaborators. Still, no such exchange is in sight for the Cuban Five who struggled only to avoid spilling both Cuban and American blood.

During the attacks of September 11, 2001, Cuba offered its airspace to US aircraft. Fidel Castro condemned terrorism in absolute terms. Cuba has never resorted to terrorism. We are not ashamed of being counted among all those who have fought for independence in Latin America or in the world.

When American athletes come to Cuba, we play their country’s national anthem and the Cuban people stand up as a sign of respect. Our battle is a battle of ideas. We are grateful to the American citizens who helped José Martí. We express our appreciation to the Americans, Henry Reeve, for example, who fought in the Cuban War for Independence, heroes fallen on the battlefield at 26 or 27 years of age. We welcome American scientists who put their discoveries at the service of our nation. We admire American culture with which we are so imbued. Our second language is English. I believe that had the US shown more understanding toward the Cuban Revolution and its causes, we would be living together peacefully today. Cuba extends its hand of friendship to the people of the US. Through the voices of its leaders, Cuba has made it clear that it is prepared to discuss all issues with the US government, but as equal to equal. We are small gladiators in the middle of the arena and as such, we simply wish to say one thing, something expressed one day by Fidel Castro in front of the US Interests Section in Havana: ‘Ave Caesar, those who are about to die salute you.’ But neither Fidel nor the Revolution is dead. Fidel has conquered death and the Revolution as well.

SL: What precisely does Fidel Castro represent for Cuba?

EL: Just as some people are Marxist, Platonist, Hegelian, Martinian [disciples of José Martí], from a personal point of view, I am a Fidelista. Only Fidel was able to weave together the disparate elements capable of alleviating my existential anxieties and carving out a modest place for me in Cuban society. It was very important for me as a person of Christian faith to have a revolutionary leader who was able to understand that it was impossible to make a successful revolution in Cuba or on the continent without involving people of faith, such as Father Varela, Camilo Torres and many others who fought for a better world.

Fidel, the man, the gentleman, the human being with his convictions and his faults, interests me very much. Fidel Castro has never summoned anyone to duty without he himself first being on the front line. He has never demanded an effort from people without leading by example. He always faced the toughest and the most agonising of situations with unshakeable faith in the destiny of the world.
During his illness, an Arab leader was one of the few to visit him. At the time of taking leave, he said, ‘Fidel, if it were necessary to make you healthy, I would sacrifice my eyes.’ I think the same thing.

SL: How do you envision the Cuba of tomorrow?
EL: I don’t know. I would like to be able to imagine it. I think it will be different, not only because of some natural law of evolution of society and species, but because Cubans will also be different. ‘When I was a child, I thought like a child’, St. Paul said. ‘When I was young, I thought like a youth.’ So today’s younger generation and future generations will also think differently, provided that they receive as a gift this concept that we have inherited from our fathers. My mother often said to me as I watched her of an evening ironing clothes to make money for food, ‘I did not prostitute myself in order to raise you.’ I hope that future generations will think the same of us.

Translated from the French by Larry R. Oberg.