This seminar on the urban history of Havana will be team-taught with the Cuban architectural historian Eduardo Luis Rodriguez – a visiting fellow at PLAS – who is the island’s top specialist on the subject. The seminar covers architecture in Havana from the arrival of the Spanish, through centuries of colonization, the years of the Republic, the Cuban Revolution, and the Soviet Years. It concludes by studying Havana’s Master Plans for the future in light of its current predicament as a magnet for international tourism.

The US embargo, imposed on Cuba since 1958, has had an unusual effect on the city. As building materials are scarce, nothing has been destroyed by design, though hundreds of buildings have crumbled due to the difficulties of finding materials for preservation. Havana thus shows an unbroken architectural tradition stretching over the past four centuries. It is the best anthology of Latin American architecture in existence, though a great part of these structures are in ruins.

Despite the embargo, the island has never been cut off from recent developments. Cuba – and Havana in particular – has always been a major cultural and ethnic crossroads, and it is this global perspective – operative long before the word acquired its current meaning – that we want to capture by studying the urban and architectural traces left behind by the Spaniards, the British, the Chinese, the Americans, the Soviets – not to mention Christian, Jewish, Muslim and African religions. Traces of the indigenous Taínos, who were the major casualty of colonization, can be seen largely in the vernacular architecture of the countryside. Influence of the conquering Spanish, on the other hand, is ubiquitous and has received critical attention from international as well as Cuban scholars. Equally important, and much more diffuse, is the enormous impact of Africa which we will study in class and in situ. Far less known in this country is the history of the tens of thousands of Chinese indentured laborers who arrived in Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century to replace African slaves in the sugar cane fields. The Chinos Cubanos, which over the decades seem to have been totally absorbed by inter-marriage, have nevertheless enriched the city with distinctive forms of their own, often added to pre-existing structures. This rich tapestry of influences, cutting across North/South and East/West divides, constitutes the core of the seminar which embraces the notion of architecture as a form of writing that records the presence, the labor, and the sufferings of different social groups. This focus is innovative, as it avoids a national – i.e, “Cuban” – approach to Havana’s urban history, but insists instead on a transcultural perspective.

In the 1950s, modern architects of all stripes either went to Havana or sent their projects, among others Mies van der Rohe (Germany), Richard Neutra (Austria), Philip Johnson (the US), and José Maria Sert (Spain). Cuba, however, was not only on the receiving end, but produced a vibrant, elegant and highly original modern architecture perfectly calibrated to the climate and the mores of the population, inflected by both class and ethnicity.
But Havana also reflects other aspects of globalization. In Cuba, fuel is expensive thus limiting industrial growth. Although it has a tiny carbon footprint, like other island nations it is currently bearing a huge environmental burden. Rich nations outsource their greenhouse gas emissions, and the floods that increasingly assail the island, pose a major problem for the restoration of its landmarks. The Malecón, the famous five-mile promenade that faces the sea, is constantly battered by the Nortes, the strong winds from the North that coat the elegant buildings with salt spray and harm preservation efforts. Likewise, yearly flooding in the center of the city, brings economic hardship to the homes and businesses of those who can least afford it. We want to study the measures taken by the local population and the government to combat the effect of climate change on the city, a major problem that is not of their making.

In keeping with other global trends, Cubans have been experimenting successfully with small-scale sustainable agriculture. In a country that lacks not only fuel but also its derivatives such as fertilizers and pesticides, agriculture plays a secondary role. As a result, one of Cuba’s major concerns has to do with the need for urban farming at the outskirts of the urban environment. To this end, we shall visit the organoponic plantations at Alamar in the eastern part of the city, where retired residents have been cultivating produce with organic means.

Finally, the seminar will focus on a more destructive aspect of globalization. Havana is attracting ever larger numbers of tourists and hence the attention of developers. This situation poses an enormous threat to cultural heritage. Cuba’s architects and urbanists have for years been working on Master Plans to mitigate the impact of foreign intervention in a nation starved for cash. No one can predict, of course, which way the winds will blow after Raul Castro, but we need to be prepared for different eventualities.

Participants
Because this course involves travel abroad, it is limited to Juniors and Seniors who will spend the semester studying Havana’s urban development and will thus be primed to make the most of their stay in the city. Each student will have a project and will use his or her free time to photograph or film different aspects of the city and interview our interlocutors, with a view to enriching the research paper that they will present at the end of the term.

Benefits to the students and to the global community at Princeton.
In any project sponsored by the university, the trip should benefit Princeton and the host country to which we are traveling rather than the students exclusively. In other words, the “deliverables” should not be those of a stand-alone project. Thanks to the presence of Eduardo Luis Rodríguez, I hope to forge durable networks with colleagues and institutions in Havana that may benefit other groups and programs at Princeton: the Department of Architecture of the Office of the City Historian who is in charge of the restoration of Old Havana; ICOMOS-Cuba (the Cuban Committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites); and DOCOMOMO-Cuba (the Cuban Committee for the Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement).

Another aspect of service to Princeton – though only indirectly to the university – has to do with volunteer work. Students will be required to give something back to the community in exchange for the trip. For my past two seminar trips to Shanghai and Havana, I have asked students to take turns working at the Cornerstone Community Kitchen across the street from Aaron Burr Hall (it works in partnership
with TASK, the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen). This encourages students to understand that because so much is given them, much is expected in return. It also helps build a strong esprit de corps which is crucial for traveling abroad as a group.

Finally, in an advanced class such as this, I would like to encourage students to submit their papers to undergraduate journals and conferences. For the first seminar in Shanghai, we managed to publish half the student papers in *PJEAS*, the Princeton Journal of East Asian Studies. I would like to work with the students of the Havana seminar to see if we can achieve something comparable.

**Logistical support**

Taking a group to Cuba involves working with Havanatour, Cuba’s official tourist agency. They reserve the hotel, order the bus, prepay half the meals, and take care of the visas, since we cannot use an American credit card or draw money from an ATM. I attach the invoice with the prices they sent us last Spring which, however, they did not itemize. They also require we take a guide along, even if we do not want one. When I took the undergraduates to Havana in the Spring of 2016 -- I was team-teaching a slightly different course with Michael Wood -- we did all the supplementary work for the trip in the Department of Art and Archaeology, collaborating as well with McCosh to make sure students received the requisite vaccines to travel to Cuba.