

# The Morro Castle of Santiago de Cuba,

A piece of World Heritage

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The Morro Castle in Santiago de Cuba is one of the most singular monuments in Cuba and the Caribbean area. UNESCO, in 1997, included it among the World Heritage sites [1]. On account of its architectural relevance, the Castle currently is a history museum. Along with two other castles (the Morro of Havana and that of San Juan de Puerto Rico), related among them because of their age, design and context, it is one of the components of the most symbolic fortified triad of the Americas [2]

Diego Velázquez, in 1514, founded the city of Santiago de Cuba, and headquartered the government of the island there until 1607, when Havana was chosen as the new capital. Santiago remained then as a second capital, an explainable situation on account of the trade volume originating from its borders with the continent and the Antilles (West Indies). In addition, Santiago had immense strategic value associated with the control of the large Cuban Eastern region and the surrounding sea lanes. That's why the Castle was built on the Southeast coast of the island, facing the Caribbean Sea.

In spite of several belligerent periods and unremitting threats posed by the pirates, the Castle took over defensive functions as part of the Spanish Crown plans to rely on navy fleets and forts as defensive platforms

against major enemies, such as the Netherlands and England. This was the history that repeated itself through centuries during the Spanish colonial period: the coastal cities survived thanks to their fortified walls and bastions that sprang up from the conquest process or to protect the major trade routes.

## The first Morro Castle

Santiago, erected on a large harbor and surrounded with mountains at its back, seemed to be a safe port and, in order to defend it appropriately, it became necessary to erect a protective site on the Eastern side of its narrow entrance. The place chosen for this was a compact promontory or morro, whose highest point reached approximately 64 meters, something that made it an ideal watchtower with combat capabilities, located about 8 kilometers away from the city itself.

Long before the construction of the Morro, a corps of watchmen who were "native aborigines" had served on that site. Moreover, the place lacked fortifications until the war with the Netherlands in the 17th century.

Since the previous century, the city had trenches, a raveling, and cannons cast in the nearby copper mines of Santiago del Prado. In 1606, Bishop Cabezas Altamirano, recommended that, at the entrance of the harbor, ... "a modest 6-piece fort and platform should



be built” and remarked emphatically: “The port is wonderful, more capable than the one of Havana...”

In 1635, an attack by the Dutch corsair Cornelio Hol, known as Pie de Palo (Wooden Foot), was repelled by the people of Santiago, led by their governor Juan Amézquita Quijano. In spite of this success, that attack caused such alarm to the Crown that it led the monarch to grant priority to the proper strengthening of the city, and most of all, the Morro. This mission was entrusted to Juan Bautista Antonelli, a military engineer who arrived in Santiago, coming from Puerto Rico, on July 26, 1638[3].

Antonelli, between 1639 and 1643, designed and carried out the construction of the Castle of San Pedro de la Roca in the Morro of Santiago. The chosen name paid homage to Captain Pedro de la Roca de Borja, governor of the city, who gave impetus to the project. The primary design consisted of two tiered platforms that merged with the natural escarpments of the site. It also called for a tower at the highest point, seeking predominance over the sea and the land, and admitting up to 25 artillery units. The cost was estimated to be 30,000 ducats.

The main platform and the watchtower were finished in August 1639. Governor Roca de Borja proposed to add a bulwark and link the various parts of the fortress with each other, with the purpose of achieving full defense capabilities. [4]. The Crown also refuted the tactical-defensive concept applied by Antonelli and recommended to carry out a work with “four bulwarks” in a most appropriate place in the inner harbor, criticizing as erroneous the nearness of the work performed to the mouth of the harbor.

By 1641, the Governor relates that the fortress had been finished and that military barracks and a cistern were in the process of being built. By 1643, the fortress had a closed polygon, with two bulwarks on the landside, placed on the rocky summit. The lower platform, known as El Sacramento, was designed in a “diamond point” shape. The frontage design, on the landside, showed a hornwork type of shape, due to its many recesses and protrusions. That is the fort that Antonelli left us, including other improvements carried out in situ, which enriched the original design.

### **The English invasion and the new Morro**

In 1662, under the government of Don Pedro de Morales, English forces commanded by Commodore Christopher Myings seized the Morro Castle and destroyed it. This act resulted on a renewed commitment to build better defenses around Santiago, a circumstance achieved under the government of Don Pedro Bayona Villanueva. He started the reconstruction of the Morro and the building of new forts and coastal batteries. In the city itself, a project to build a fort around the Convent of St. Francis was also approved

The rebuilding of the Morro went on at a slow pace, during the tenures of Bayona and Andrés Magaña. (1660-77). Throughout this stage, the works were entrusted to Juan de Siscara Ibáñez, an engineer from Madrid. However, in 1678, an earthquake left the Castle in ruins. From 1691 onwards, Governor Juan de Villalobos gave new impetus to the rebuilding of the Castle. Francisco Pérez, a mulatto from Santiago, who was an architect for Royal Works, took part in this process of reconstruction. These works were completed in 1697, under the administration of Don Sebastián de Arencibia Ysasi and conducted under the guidance of Juan Siscara Ramírez, an engineer from Santiago, and the son of the previously mentioned Juan de Siscara Ibáñez.

To be faithful to the truth, we must say that the finishing process of details of the new Castle lasted until 1702. In the 1695-97 period, the expenses of the works amounted to 99,548 reales. As it was usual in Cuba, the building of fortifications was mostly financed by funds known as “el situado”, money from Nueva España (Mexico) with funds coming from the locals being rather meager.

During the period of 1691 to 1697 the Castle adopted the layout that nowadays defines its configuration: a walled polygon of irregular shape, a triangular base, a ravelin, a ditch or pit, a covered trail, military quarters and other inner facilities, a communication system (doors and ramps), etc. Later, new works began in the ditch, as well as the construction of a drawbridge (1702). Improvements in the counterscarp of the ditch and in the covered trail kept on going until 1741 and were supervised by engineer Antonio Arredondo.



Moreover, the Castle was also supported by an outer defensive network of tiered coastal batteries projected towards the inner harbor (the batteries of La Punta, La Estrella and Santa Catalina).

Another earthquake, in 1766, partially destroyed the Castle. This led to a renewed commitment to refortify it, emerging from the pressures to update all defensive military positions that guided the policies of King Charles III of Spain after the seizure of Havana by the English troops in 1762.

Field Marshal Alejandro O'Reilly, in agreement with the military engineer Beltrán Beaumont, was the author of the project to improve the defensive complex of Santiago de Cuba (1764). This stage of projects and works lasted until 1784. Other military engineers cooperated in those projects and these include: Agustín Crame; Lieutenant Colonel Juan Martín Carreño; Francisco Suárez Calderín, from Havana, and Antonio F. Cubero.

Between 1771 and 1777, the reconstruction of The Morro took place under Antonio de Leyva, Antonio Fernández Trevejo and Ventura Buceta. The latter remodeled the land frontage that took the typical appearance of the fortification of the 18th century. New vaults were built; the thickness of the parapets was changed; sites were designated as jails for prisoners, etc. Additional repairs were made towards the end of the century, under Chief Engineer Cayetano Paveto, with the help of Fermín Montaña.

During the 19th century, the Morro began to be discarded as an effective fortress, but nevertheless it underwent new functional changes and repairs. Eventually, it became a political prison and, during the war against the U.S., it was adapted for the placement of coastal artillery. It was abandoned in 1920, but its restoration began in 1958-60 by Francisco Prat Puig, a Spanish archaeologist who lived in Santiago.

### **The transition from fortress to monument**

From a technical perspective, the Morro Castle of Santiago is an example of the Spanish military engineering that prevailed in the 18th century. It was changing from the Italian Renaissance concept, still very much alive in Antonelli Jr., towards the French, Flemish and Hispanic patterns, with an emphasis on organic design and functionality for wartime. The irregularity of its layout, in contrast with the

surrounding physical environment, leaves this fortress "devoid of style" when you try to define it formally. Roberto Segre, former Chairman of the Architectural History department of the Polytechnic Institute in Havana, considers that El Morro is an original fortification with many of the variables typical of a Spanish-American fortresses, which grants to the Morro a remarkable typological significance.

This castle displays an impressive volumetric wealth, and its ground plan is typical of the 18th century, with features that remind us of the irregular technique of Italian fortifications, due to its outer appearance, with irregular "collapsed" masses of various heights over the spurs of the promontories and a well-shaped land frontage. In addition, it also features a diversity of levels that enrich its inner organic disposition, where patios, ramps, esplanades and buildings superimpose on one another.

The impressive walls, outstanding over high cliffs, also contribute to the medieval image that is commonly attributed to the castle. For a "combat platform", such as this castle was meant to be, the uses of the land, in harmony with the formal tenets of war architecture, synthesize a vision about how, in colonial times, the defense of a maritime boundary was conceived. Safety, as codified in the blueprints, evolved towards the composition of design and operational functionality. Because of its art, history, uniqueness, expressive beauty and architecture, the Morro of Santiago, as a monument, is one of the most interesting landmarks of the Americas.

[1] Declared National Monument on December 1979, and later declared by UNESCO as a piece of World Heritage in the category of Cultural Site during the XXI World Heritage Committee Meeting, which took place on December 1-6, 1997, in Naples, Italy. The Cultural Criteria IV and V of the Convention for Protecting the Cultural and Natural World Heritage were taken into account for this selection..

[2] Please refer to our essay "Tres ejemplos de fortificación caribeña: los castillos del Morro de La Habana, Santiago de Cuba y de San Juan de Puerto Rico", Santiago, Revista de la Universidad de Oriente, No. 76, Santiago de Cuba, July-December, 1993, pp. 53-80.

[3] He was the son of the renowned Bautista Antonelli, builder of the Morro of Havana. He developed his career in America, Santiago de Cuba, Havana, Cartagena de Indias, etc. He also built the Cojimar and La Chorrera Towers in Havana. Refer to: Antonio Ramos Zúñiga. La ciudad de los castillos: fortificaciones y arte defensivo en La Habana de los siglos XVI al XIX. Ed. Trafford, Canada, 2006.

[4] Isabelo Macías. Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo XVII. Sevilla, Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1978, pp. 277-78.