Exhibit, website show Havana in high-res

Satellite and street-level photos are combined to help imagine a Cuba of the future.

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Havana Today in Images, a Miami Dade College photo exhibit that opens today at the Tower Theater in Little Havana, raises new though uncertain hopes among Cuban exiles for the reclamation of their property in a post-Castro Cuba.

The exhibit, which was organized by a Florida International University-based NASA office in collaboration with MDC, matches satellite images of specific zones of Havana with building-by-building, street-level photography.

A link on the project's website (http://no-more.com) clicks to an affidavit that can be filed, with supporting documentation, claiming ownership of the building photographed.

But whether the project will eventually help people reclaim property confiscated under Fidel Castro's regime is uncertain.

"Whether this is considered proper evidence depends on who would be processing these applications," says Tania Mastrapa, who runs a Miami consulting practice on property reclamation in Cuba (www.mastrapaconsultants.com).

"I have not heard of these claim mechanisms being used in other countries," says Mastrapa, whose doctoral thesis at the University of Miami examined post-Communist property claims in the Czech Republic and Nicaragua and the lessons they could have for Cuba.

Still, she says, owners can see how their building is being used, if there's a sign for a restaurant, for example, or what shape it's in. Then they can decide if they want to try to reclaim it.

"A lot of people outside Cuba don't even know if their property still exists because of hurricanes, deterioration of buildings and lack of maintenance," Mastrapa says.

The project's creator and director, Naphtali David Rishe, says it has "no political message."

Rishe heads FIU's High Performance Database Research Center and NASA Regional Applications Center, also at FIU.

The latter is a branch of the agency that looks for non-governmental uses for NASA technology.

"Like Velcro," says Rishe, unfastening such a strap on his sandal at his Miami Beach office.

Rishe, who says he has had "no contact with entities in the Havana government," had the street-level photos taken on the sly by Cuban Americans visiting the island on family visit visas.

"They used innocuous-looking high-definition cameras and devices that identify the buildings' longitude and latitude coordinates.

One application of Rishe's project will find enthusiasts on both sides of the Florida Straits: the reconstruction of Havana.
"In Cuba there is a lot of information on the destruction of the city," says architect Nicolás Quintana, who along with the dean of FIU's Architecture School, Juan Antonio Bueno, heads the Havana and its Landscapes project. "But this photographic project is very important at the level of detail."

Since 2004, Quintana and his associates at FIU have been working on a vision of the future of Havana that hopes to guide Cubans, Cuban Americans and others to eventually rebuild the badly dilapidated city.

The street-level photos of Havana Today in Images will constitute "a historical register of what buildings looked like, because many are doomed to disappear," Quintana says.

In his oceanfront office, Rishe calls up on his laptop the image of a badly deteriorated Havana building. He navigates toward detailed sections of the high-definition photo, showing Moorish arches, barely discernible in the rubble. "Got to apply some stucco," Rishe says, smiling.

So far, about 1,000 buildings have been photographed at street level. A few will be on display at the show, along with a wall-sized satellite photo of sections of Havana. The other buildings will be shown in a computerized slide show.

On the issue of exiles trying to take back property, Quintana, who owned property in Havana but does not plan to try to reclaim it, thinks a great deal of wisdom must be exercised.

"You just can't evict people who've been living in a residence for 35 years," he says. "There has to be some social justice."

Quintana supports eventually issuing bonds to compensate for losses caused by the Castro government. "It does not have to be a big compensation," he says, "just a symbol of what was lost."

Rishe hopes his project will help Havana become "a better space while preserving its cultural heritage."

"Havana could become, once again, the Florence of the Americas," Rishe says.