

The Conquest of Suburbia: Interpreting 20th Century Puerto Rican Architecture Trans-Culturization Patterns

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It usually happens this way: a new ethnic group comes into a settled environment and accepts—*prima fasciae*—existing urban and architectural traditions. If the group possesses strong cultural definition, slowly but surely, it will help transform these experiences, as it brings into consideration its own traditions. A Hegelian development takes place: to the existing thesis (the city and its architectural traditions), new ideas (which might include antitheses) are contrasted. After a period of co-existence and, at times, conflict, a new synthesis is created.

What happens, however, when the newcomers have the advantage of imposing their ideas? What transcends when, from day one, the new ethnic group has the power to make believe that its ideas embody a superior moral social mode? This was the case with European powers in America during the 16th century, after the so-called “discovery.” This was also the case of Puerto Rico after 1898.

Once the “splendid little war”¹ known to historians as the Spanish American War was won, the United States found itself in charge of the destiny of a group of Caribbean islanders: the Puerto Ricans. After four centuries of Spanish colonial rule that, generously, can only be described as extremely paternalistic, the natives failed to do as the Cubans. They simply could not get their act together. As a result they were unable to take immediate control of their political future. This power vacuum was filled by the *coloso del Norte*, as the United States was known.

On July 25, 1898, more than an army invaded Puerto Rico. After 400 hundred years of sleepy existence in the shadow of an old and crumbling Empire that lacked both the energy and resolution to be part of the modern world, the island encountered modernity with a vengeance. As new beliefs and concepts came to be experienced, a new Puerto Rican came to exist. This new being was the result of social strife that generated new transculturization architectural patterns. The Foucaultian conflict found a way of expressing itself in the 20th century’s architectural battlefield: suburbia. As the new social order brought forth ideas that were considered better than the ones practiced by the locals, new architectural and urban products were introduced in the form of suburban architectural containers. Behind this new way of doing things was a will to transform islanders into the idealized American icon, an image sponsored by the conquering power. It took some time, three decades, for suburbia to become the battlefield where the old and new ways of interpreting life took place.

The New Deal presented by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt provided the opportunity of establishing new contractual terms between mainlanders and Puerto Ricans. One of

his administration’s main objectives was to bring back “happy times” throughout the nation; the island-colony was to participate in this joyous venture. This deal was a formal effort to help solve existing social woes in a harmonious fashion. Most importantly, it was also a concerted effort to “melt” islanders into the American “pot,” by promoting cultural change. Thus, the New Deal architectural artifacts were instruments by means of which the new sovereign power tried to integrate islanders into its mainstream.

True to the times, American efforts—for the most part—were directed at people that were considered if not inferior at least weird. Puerto Ricans spoke a different language, abided by their own rules, and exhibited traits characteristic of tropical people. As discrimination of all sorts was the order of the day in the United States, easy generalizations were most useful as theoretical basis for the new architectural concerns. At the time, social analysis [*sic*] of Puerto Ricans presented them as living, if not *la vida loca*, a kind of perpetual party or *fiesta*. These cultural differences caused concern in the United States and generated a desire to eradicate them. Suburban subdivisions and the transformation of forests into recreational pleasure grounds were to achieve the goal of deconstructing four-centuries old social traditions.

During the 19th century, the common folk in the United States had taken the constitutional concept of the pursuit of happiness as literal recognition of certain basic rights. Among these was the right to enjoy life and—a direct corollary—to own a house. At the time, it was felt that: “Nothing is so beautiful as great horizons, immense landscapes, perspectives whose extent one’s eye cannot seize. Great spectacles reinvigorate man’s forces, stir his heart and seduce his imagination.”² In the United States, as in Britain before, the suburbs became the place where the “great spectacles” were to be enacted. Puerto Rico was to follow suit. As a result, the island’s pristine and previously uninhabited suburban area came to be dotted with subdivisions and recreational forests, all part of a strategy to make the islanders part of the American melting pot.

The Suburban House

Puerto Ricans accepted the new social values by adapting the United States’ housing icon: the suburban house. More importantly, due to American influence they started to believe that owning a house was a right, accepting social values concerning the domestic dwelling’s importance. With this new concept filtering in, an integral part of the pursuit of happiness ideal, the four-centuries Latin/Catholic view of domestic life came to an

end, as houses were now interpreted as abodes for enjoying life.

In the island, housing conditions had remained unchanged since the 15th century. By the 1940's, the houses inhabited by the common folk were still described in the following fashion:

In the island, housing conditions had remained unchanged since the 15th century. In sharp contrast to the massive, solid structures of the cities are the *bohíos*, or cabins of the country people, constructed in much the same manner as the aboriginal homes of the Indians which the Spaniards found on their arrival.³

Spanish urbanist Soria y Mata's idea of: "To each family a house, in each house an orchard and a garden,"⁴ had simply been a dream: owning property was strictly limited to the upper classes, who huddled in their designated areas within the old urban centers. The common folk lived in land belonging to others, holding an *arrimao* status.⁵ The *bohíos*, the traditional home type of the less fortunate, planted in these locales provided little, if any, comfort, much less, a garden of any sort. Because of their makeshift design ethos and primitive construction materials, they lacked substance and decorum. If Bachelard is right and the individual house is a "shelter for the imagination," most 19th and early 20th century Puerto Ricans lacked such sanctuary.⁶

Bachelard has also elucidated that: "Out of the house is a 'container'" that acts like a "chest," protecting the user's "intimate immensity."⁷ In the island, such domestic privacy was non-existent. Urban houses existed side by side to all sort of other uses, including commercial ones. Even when generated as individual artifacts, as was the case with the *bohíos*, native houses did not allow for any privacy. Its materials and design objectives made the notion totally inconsequential. With the new imported types, however, the traditional Puerto Rican house came to an end.

While in the United States suburban developments aimed to de-urbanize the city, in Puerto Rico the subdivision (*urbanización*) was an instrument to achieve this new desire for domestic privacy. Love for suburbia, in my opinion, is one of the most important American ideas to influence the island. It simply had not existed before. While some had *haciendas* in the countryside (*campo*), they also had a town house that they considered their formal residence. Before 1898, you lived in the countryside because you had to, not because you wanted to. Before American influence, the frontier between the city and the "non-city" had been explicit and quite specific.

By the end of the third decade of the 20th century this had changed and the traditional urban-suburban binary relationship became blurred. America's lessons made a mark and Puerto Rico decided to grasp for the illusion provided by suburbia. Most people now wanted to be part of the new way of living; they wanted their "piece of the pie." For the first time in their lives, some were not asking, but demanding. Political parties (like the Partido Popular Democrático) made the dream of the individual house an issue and included it as a goal of its political platform. The creation of the Federal Housing Administration, as well as

the local Compañía de Fomento and Banco Gubernamental de Fomento, made financial help possible.

In addition to experimenting with new architectural typologies and domestic morphologies, new construction systems were introduced. Concrete was used for the first time in grand scale projects, while ordinary wood panels were used to create inexpensive molds into which the concrete was poured. This method became the paradigmatic building technique for the subdivision houses by claiming to be more modern and hygienic than traditional ways. This technical development transformed everything, from the exteriors to the interiors. Interior height, for example, was now controlled by the wooden molds. For the first time in centuries, formal interiors⁸ came to be conceived as small and intimate places; some being only eight feet in height. In the early days, all subdivision houses had gardens, as well as small balconies, living and dining rooms, kitchen and one bathroom. The number of bedrooms, treated as small alcoves, varied but they all had a modern touch: closets. The old days of the cumbersome wardrobes and clothing lines were gone.

These houses, in their internal organization and repetitive models generated a new way of living, making possible personal intimate enjoyment. Nevertheless, there was a need to create some kind of architectural artifact that could provide existential foothold⁹ to the enjoyment of nature. A new suburban container was generated when the forests were transformed into pleasure grounds for this particular purpose.

The Forests

In Puerto Rico, before 1898, recreational ventures – such as communing with nature – were strictly limited to the higher classes. Thus, until the early part of the 20th century, most islanders experienced a *Landschaft* relationship with nature: it was there but they were not part of it. With American influence, a new perception came into being: nature, particularly forests, came to be interpreted as scenery, an essential component of human experience. The idea was generated in a 1935 study made by the federal authorities. At that time it was established that – under American rule – Puerto Ricans had "evolved" and were now "capable of a well ordered social and industrial life." Nevertheless it was found that, these "happy, helpful, pleasure-loving persons," inhabitants of one of the most densely populated places in the universe,¹⁰ still had only one form of enjoyment: the *fiesta*, quaintly defined as: "impromptu gatherings . . . commonly unorganized" in which "the participants take their fun as they do their food, part and parcel of their organic [sic] life."

Something had to be done; new recreational concepts and architectural artifacts were needed so that the islanders' social interaction could be more "normal," more American. Therefore, it was decided to move the "*fiesta* moved to the forest."¹¹ This intimate interaction with the centuries-old woods was to be as modern as possible and it was to be accompanied by all necessary accoutrements. The back to nature movement was to be a civilized return to a tamed, organized and "Americanized" nature.

By taming and “embellishing” (Andrew Jackson Downing’s term) the natural forests, it was expected that Puerto Ricans would escape social uncertainties characteristic of the time in a prearranged American manner. In a civilized world that promised no security, taming nature was to serve as a palliative. The 1930’s generation was to take nature and model it after its own dreams. According to Tuan,¹² culture is the direct result of our fear of nature. We escape nature (our paradise lost) by creating culture. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), one of the most formidable creations of the Roosevelt administration, was in charge of returning Puerto Ricans their lost paradise. In addition, the CCC social discourse in the island was also designed as an instrument of behavioral modification. The transformation of forests into pleasure grounds was just a means to an end: alter the local attitude to both the past and the future.

Emulating mainland morphologies, the old forests were transformed into picnic grounds, an unheard of use before 1935. Therefore, as part of their “melting” process, Puerto Ricans were to discover that forest picnics were: “a pleasant and profitable way of passing leisure time.”¹³ Cabins, picnic tables, fireplaces, shelters, water holes, cabins, observation towers, bridges, among many others, were to forge a spatial and semantic relationship that would transform the previously intimidating forest into a fun places.

After the CCC intervention, the Puerto Rican forests became not only pleasure grounds. They also came to tell a story, told by means of the different architectural incidents. Of particular relevance were the towers scattered all over the woods. The CCC used towers as the end of certain spatial sequences. Once you got there, they framed a view, and brought into focus the great protagonist of the whole enterprise: the forest. The tower was the end of the trail but also the beginning of a new journey: the communing with the scenery and, at times, with the *genius loci* of the site. The Fort Capron tower in Guánica is evidence of this approach. It frames a magnificent view but it is also an associational quote to the memory of Captain Ellyn K Capron, an American soldier who died during the Spanish American War. Thus, forests were also interpreted as cultural repositories, as landscapes that were symbolic of the trans-culturization patterns, which the island had undergone since 1898.

Conclusions

Not many people consider subdivisions and CCC forest designs social artifacts of cultural significance. Subdivisions are considered too big, sprawl too much and lack the traditional cohesion architectural artifacts are supposed to have. Landscape design, on the other hand, embodies too many intangibles, and – at times – is not even perceived as “true” architecture. Nevertheless, for Puerto Rico and the United States these two architectural types, that are still protagonists of our daily existence, are social icons of our social intercourse. As such, they are part of our shared cultural heritage.

Both provided individuals with the opportunity to experience

the pursuit of happiness, American style. As cultural resources belonging to the recent past, we must confront and interpret them carefully, making sure we understand their societal role and what they came to represent to millions of hearts, as the United States tried to mold Puerto Rico and its four-centuries old architectural and urban patterns into its image.

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- 1 This was the term used by the American press to describe the war. As conflicts go, it lasted a very short time (hence, the “little”). It also had “splendid” results, for it transformed the United States into a colonial power
- 2 César Daly, *Revue Général de l'Architecture et des Travaux Publiques* (1843), quoted in M C Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), p 15.
- 3 The complete quote reads as follows: “The real *bohío*, raise a few feet above the ground on stilts, is made from palm thatch, with one or at the most two rooms, and sometimes a lean-to kitchen, where cooking is done over a charcoal fire. Furniture is scant and simple, consisting mostly of be-hammocks, pallets, or perhaps cot beds with *colchonetas* (quilts) thrown over the springs. Usually the interior walls are brightened by gay pictures from illustrated magazines and newspapers. The crude construction of these humble homes is offset by a profusion of flowers and blossoming vines.” Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, *Puerto Rico A Guide to the Island of Borinquen*, p 118.
- 4 Spanish urban theorist Soria y Mata used this slogan – *A cada familia una casa, en cada casa una huerta y un jardín* – when trying to interest buyers in one of his development projects. Soria y Mata was also the creator of the concept of the linear city (*ciudad lineal*).
- 5 A year after the invasion, the situation was described by an American in the following fashion: “House-rent is an almost unknown factor in the country, though in towns many people huddle into one house and live, amid dirt and disease, at the expense to each family of a few *pesos* a month. It is customary for landed proprietors to grant to their peons small patches, on the steep hillsides, which are of little value for tillage. This meets the end of assuring their services to the plantation-owners upon demand, with no expense to himself, and secures him the éclat of being apparently a philanthropist.” W Dinwiddie, *Puerto Rico Its Conditions and Possibilities* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899), p 157.
- 6 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p ix.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 I am referring, naturally, to formal domestic buildings, whether built of wood or masonry. The *bohíos* lacked formal interior areas. The height issue was very important in the old days. Houses were called *solariega* if they contained spacious, airy interiors.
- 9 The concept of existential foothold is used in the same context as. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), pp 5- 15.
- 10 At this time, it was estimated that 1,723,534 persons lived in the 100 x 30 miles island. Civilian Conservation Corps, “Forest Recreation in Puerto Rico” (MS), pp 7-9.
- 11 *Ibid.*

- 12 Y Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p 19.
- 13 Civilian Conservation Corps, "Forest Recreation in Puerto Rico" (MS), pp 7-9.

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