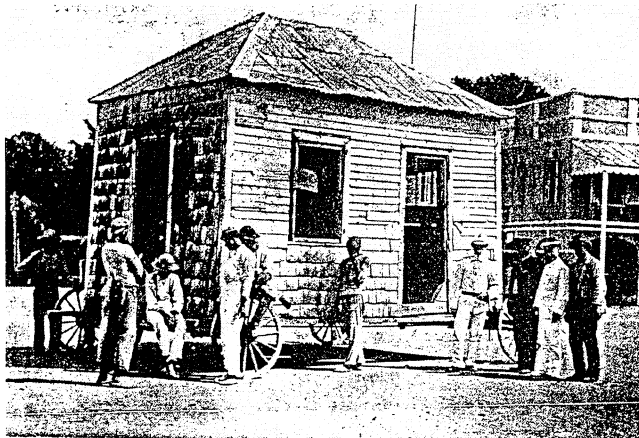


Nomad Dwellings

Property, House Moving and Urban Growth in Ponce, Puerto Rico 1864-1963

Alejandro Santiago Villoch

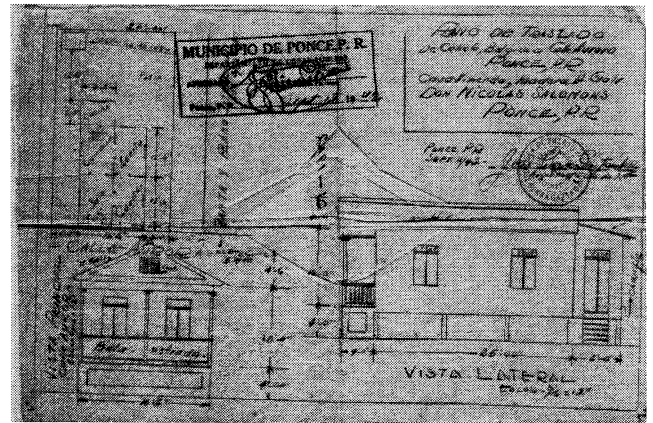


In 1963, Isabel Villoch Rivera, being only ten years old, followed her home as it moved. Looking at the house from the backseat of a car trailing behind, the little girl could distinguish her parents riding inside the one-story wooden structure in which she had not been allowed to travel. At such an early age, Isabel could not comprehend neither safety concerns nor the fact that her house was being relocated. Formerly next to the shore in the Amalia Marín sector of Ponce, Puerto Rico, the dwelling was to find its new abode in Barrio “La Guanchita”, not too far away. The Villoch family was the first to re-settle in this new neighborhood. Isabel Villoch Rivera, now in her forties, is my mother.

The Villoch family’s relocation reflected what was considered common practice at the time. House moving or “traslados de casas” had become a recurrent phenomenon in the city of Ponce since the mid 19th century. The first documented relocation of a home in Puerto Rico’s second largest city dates back to 1865 when the cost of moving a house could reach the sum of eight (8) pesos. Since then, and over a period of one hundred years, the practice became a habit. Unlike at other urban centers of Puerto Rico, in Ponce, specific circumstances made the relocation of homes a persistent necessity

The transportation of built property has played a consequential role in the urban development of Ponce. Key catalysts for said process must be underlined: street realignment in the 19th century; fire codes in the early 20th century; land & property ownership conflicts in subsequent decades, and finally, aggressive government intervention between 1940 and 1960. The multiple facts and forces, which contributed to house relocations in Ponce, raise myriad questions: To which extent did impermanence in building characterize, but also facilitate urban development in Ponce? How are concepts of land and structure as separate properties embodied in the *traslados de casas*? In what ways did home-relocation foster ad-hoc prototypes and mobile construction technologies? Why is this a concern of pertinence today?

Home moving in Puerto Rico has been a lost tradition with the last known move made in the 1960’s. Around the world it has become an even stronger tradition and is still being done today. Throughout the years, every type of structure from theatres to lighthouses and from light wood structures to massive stone edifices have all been transported. Homes have even been transported across water. (See illustrations # 1-4) This type of service is still an important and lucrative business with a world-



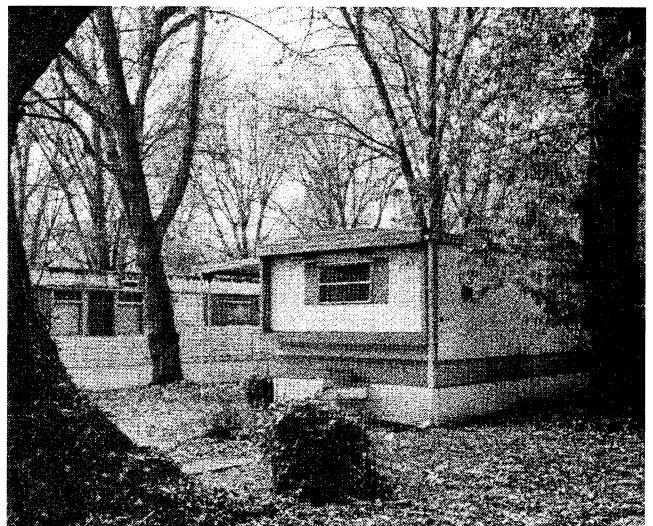
Generally, there are three basic steps in order to move a structure: first it is important to prepare the home to be independent from its foundations (see illustration 8). After the house becomes an independent object the structure is set upon temporary foundations (see illustration 9). The final step is to set the structure's loads upon the truck. (See illustration 10)

The situations in which these structures were transported generally offer an understanding of what type of effect home relocation had upon the actual structure moved. Especially what kind of thought process was involved in the construction of homes to be transported. "Caribbean Style" gives a sense that some homes were made with a premeditated intent to be moved. Other characteristics found in Creole architecture were developed to satisfy the production needs of the large plantations. On many of the islands, the workers cabin, which was part of the estate, had to be transportable. This enabled the workers to live in proximity to the field in which they were actually working. The custom of transporting cabins has been preserved, and modular cabins with standardized dimensions that facilitate relocation continue to be built.

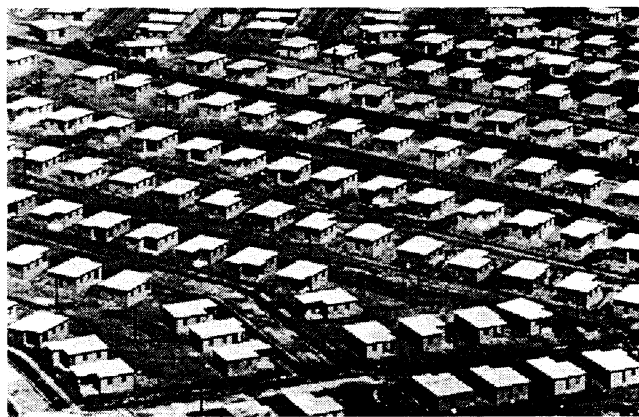
After analyzing the extensive archives of home relocation permits, I have reason to believe that an extensive quantity of homes transported had the necessary qualities to make relocation possible. I believe the homes studied in Ponce may have been constructed with premeditated need for mobility not

The process of home relocation in the municipality of Ponce entailed a request for a house-moving permit. In such appeal the dimensions of the house, the old and new destinations and a plan of the structure were required. The plan was intended to demonstrate the transportability of the structure or that the structure constructed was to be moved. (See illustrations 11-13) Alternatively, that the house was made in a manner that would facilitate structural relocation.

Most of the home relocation request depicted recurring characteristics in the home. These similar features were directly associated with the transportability of the home. The obvious similarities are the size and the construction material which was wood. Other characteristics are the elevation of the home above the ground normally 24" to 36" high. Most of the homes had the same structural details and mainly the same construction technology. There are mainly two sub typologies, the mobile home and the home constructed to facilitate structural relocation. The phenomenon described in Ponce is the latter of these typologies.



The plans presented to the municipality for home relocation permits also involved minor addition. This was usually the construction of a front porch made of a stronger material other than wood. This new added front porch was used to acknowledge the streets regulating lines. (See illustrations 14-16) The intention to make the home more permanent gave the family a stronger sense of dwelling and stability. Karsten Harries "The Ethical Function of Architecture" studies North American Trailer Parks and addresses the need the owner has to seize the mobile home



wide affiliation called the International Association of Structural Movers (www.iasm.org). “The members of this organization based in Elbridge, N.Y., moved over 10,000 buildings in 1996, and 1998 appears to be even better.” This association has members across the entire United States and the world.

Almost forty years after, Ponce’s home movers and their history are almost extinct. Julio Agostini, could be one of the last persons whom worked in this field in Puerto Rico. Mr. Agostini began his career with his father, Jesus, transporting heavy equipment for the government. (See Illustration # 5) Their company hauled equipment and materials for such important projects as the Puerto Rico International Airport and “El Puente de la Constitución”. He started moving homes when his father asked him for help to relocate one of his properties. Afterwards Julio Agostini started to receive commissions for moving houses. In the 1950’s the government of Puerto Rico commissioned Mr. Agostini to relocate 240 homes from a beachfront area in Ponce to a new sector later named “El Tuque.” Julio Agostini later turned out to be the person who moved the home of young Isabel Villoch.

There are three different ways a house can be moved relying on the technology available at the time on wooden rollers, on a coach hauled by oxen and on a flat bed truck. (See illustrations # 6-7)

they live in. Such appropriation is made physical by resting the trailer on a solid base or by installing a wooden front porch. (See illustration 17) The author argues that until the appropriation occur, the structure is a mere provider of basic shelter and should not be considered a dwelling. This is a valid reason why homeowners in Puerto Rico start looking towards stronger and more permanent construction types, concrete for example.

One of the reasons and most important consequences of home relocation is urban growth. In many cities around the world, structural moving has been a useful tool for the adaptation of their various stages of urban growth and densification. “Ironically, the urban growth that makes some moves so tricky has been the catalyst for at least two waves of building moving in the 1820’s and ’30s”

In Ponce, the urban growth that initiated the waves of house moving was due to a series of ordinances. One that promoted the urban growth of Spain’s municipalities overseas and the other ordinance referred to the frequent fires in Ponce in the 1800’s. These mandates were fundamental in the transformation of Ponce into one of Puerto Rico’s most important and developed cities.

In 1867, Spain emitted an ordinance directed to its municipalities overseas. This ordinance “La Real Orden del 9 de Julio de 1867” exhorted the municipalities to establish an urban growth scheme. The creation of the proposal in Ponce was issued to Felix Vidal D’Ors. Vidal D’Ors’s proposal would represent “the city’s coming of age as a modern urban entity”. The scheme included the chamfering of street intersections, a now typical characteristic of Ponce. (See Illustration 18)

After this urban scheme was implemented it became necessary to align the streets and therefore its facades. House moving became an important solution in this endeavor, allowing the city to adjust easily into an important stage of urban densification and growth. Because of the ability to move structures the realignment of streets became easier as in the cases of Micaella Torruella on June of 1878 in la Atocha Street in which the government intervened in the complete process of relocation.

At the end of the 19th century, municipalities in Puerto Rico were trying to establish plans to combat the frequent fires in their cities. This struggle was due to a great deal of fires in the 1800s. The governor of Puerto Rico at the period, Luis Dabán established an island wide ordinance “la Carta Circular del 8 de Junio de 1893” that was intended to attend the problem. The ordinance promoted the division of cities into sectors according to construction materials. The sectors were composed of the permanent construction, strong material and light material zones. (See illustration 19)

After these zones were established, the city began to densify. Homes near the main plaza were to be made of masonry. Owners of houses made of wood were to rebuild in a stronger material, usually masonry. Many of these cases preferred to move the wood structures out of the permanent construction zone instead of demolishing them. The homes moved were later sold or rented. As in the case of Doña Marcelina Romero y Becerra whom sold two wooden homes in her property to make way for

a home made in masonry .

The distinction of land and home as separate properties is made evident especially in Puerto Rico because extensive quantities of land was owned by few proprietors. The majority of the homes built by the working class were constructed on land that was not their own. These people were subject to how the property owner wanted to deal with the land whenever they wanted. This created a lack of belonging and permanence that may have lead to the construction of transportable homes.

One factor that articulates the contrast between owning land and home is land speculation value. In the majority of cases, the land a house is on starts to yield value as a residential zone and starts gaining value as a commercial zone. Consequently, the owner of the house practically gives away the house. That way the new owner of the house transports the structure to a different destination. This act permitted the owner of the land to take full advantage of the new value of the land. Many homes in areas that start to lose residential value are moved to better areas to regain the original value of the home.

The necessity of housing in Ponce was being satisfied in the development of new urban sectors in Ponce. These sectors were Belgica 1890's, Mariani 1920's, Clausells 1930's and Romagueras 1930's. (See illustration 20) Land in these sectors was not to be sold. The intent of these sectors was to rent the land. As a result many homes constructed in these areas were temporary or transportable structures. In the majority of the cases these structures represented the only property these citizens owned therefore in order to retain the property, the mobility of the home was premeditated.

In the 1950's, the government to establish a new beachfront in West Ponce relocated a community of homes. In this act another community was created this area is now known as "El Tuque." This is an example of a community founded in its beginnings by home relocation. All of the homes moved were transported by Julio Agustini a home mover in Ponce. As the community grew it is now one of the largest sectors in Ponce becoming almost an autonomous district.

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century the notion of homes as an impermanent object began to change. The change was due in part to a massive commercial campaign that stimulated a "need" for climate enduring homes (concrete homes). This "need" was made evident with the destructive effect provoked by hurricanes San Felipe and San Ciprián in the years 1928 and 1932, respectively.

In 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiated legislation throughout a period of twenty years that would mark the

beginnings of Puerto Rico's industrialization. Among the gestures were the "Plan `Chardón," Puerto Rico Reconstruction Agency ("PRRA"), and "Fomento Industrial." Amid their social-economical achievements was the reconstruction of Puerto Rico. To accomplish this goal the PRRA developed a scheme to construct low-cost climate-enduring homes. In that respect they created the first government owned concrete factory in Puerto Rico. When the concrete company was founded a huge publicity campaign was started. With slogans such as "construya siempre en cemento" or "garantiza permanencia" this bombardment of propaganda would set the platform for the massive need of a guaranteed permanence. (See illustrations)

"Traslados de casas" relate to the notion of property as understood in the 19th century and the beginning of the 1900's. Home and land as property were viewed as separate, allowing the city to adjust into new urban schemes and ordinances by using home relocations as a tool for change. This type of adjustment is exemplified dramatically in the film *Dark City* written by Alex Proyas. Where a group of extra-terrestrials, known as the strangers, in order to understand the human psyche manipulate the lives both physical and mental of the humans that are being studied. One of the most drastic manipulations is that of the city. Each night the city is "tuned" by the strangers to create a different cityscape as if adjusting to different circumstances and objectives. I believe the relocations of homes exemplify such a "tuning" in the city of Ponce.

These changes are much like Rem Koolhaas's vision of a modified *Tabula Rasa* for the city of Paris . In which every five years the city would demolish buildings older than twenty-five years. Koolhaas's *Tabula Rasa* promotes a systematic and constant change of the city. But Proyas offers a moderate adjustment in each stage of change.

The film acknowledges that the city can be a catalyst for human emotions and actions and understanding that a study of the social implications of nomad dwellings in Ponce will be another stage of this investigation.

The notion of land and home as separate properties was replaced with the construction of permanent structures therefore making the reuse of land more costly and energy consuming. In a time where the life-span of buildings become shorter and the city becomes a shelter for abandoned buildings should we as architects and city planners guarantee permanence? Is it possible to create an ever-changing city that is less consequential to the landscape, recovering the possible mobility the nomad dwellings in Ponce offered?

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