



Archipelagic Estates of Puerto Rico: Islands and Island Cultures in light of Climate Change

Spitzer School of Architecture, CCNY, CUNY.
Arch 51000/ 85100 Advanced Studio + Seminar
Fall 2023-Spring 2024

"In modernity, the separateness, isolation, and the relational dependencies of islands appeared to be their weakness, holding back island development, and productiveness. However, these relational sensitivities are, today, understood by many to be the key to planetary survival"

-Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, Anthropocene Islands

Historically, islands and islanders have either been romanticized or diminished for their lack of worldliness. Seen through a capitalist lens, they have been described as lacking in modernity and capacity for progress. In recent anthropological studies however, islands and island beings present a new imaginary for working through the devastating impacts of the Anthropocene. This framework views archipelagic cultures (particularly in the Caribbean) as a rich repository of relational entanglements of society *with* nature instead of against it. The Caribbean, as the locus where imperialism and colonialism unfolded most unapologetically, is also a place where ongoing catastrophic environmental events continuously disrupt human and non-human networks. In the face of this ecological vulnerability, can we begin to see islands as something other than just places to be consumed?

The lands and people of Puerto Rico have been continually challenged by the economic problems rooted in the island's political situation and its ongoing colonial status. The consumptive landscape of industrial waterfronts and plantations have slowly been displaced by the incentivized development of a leisure landscape. This unmonitored exploitation by capital from the mainland (the US) has stifled the potential of the island to form and shape its own independent destiny. False promises of modern progress have collided throughout the years with issues of identity, culture, race, and climate related catastrophes. So, if we are to speak about the other America, and its ability to critically address the exigencies of climate change we should start right here in Puerto Rico where the future has been eroded by a history of colonialism, slavery, extraction, deprivation, production, and consumption. To combat these ongoing dilemmas, people around the island are standing together in solidarity and pressing for a just recovery that draws on local participation to demand a different future. There is an incredible level of resistance and support from people on the ground who are battling to keep their home and heritage alive in collaboration with a returning diaspora, to preserve culture, reclaim land, and serve their communities to reimagine a different reality for themselves.

In the Fall of 2023, we will initiate a research seminar and lecture series at the Spitzer School of Architecture (CCNY, CUNY) and in the Spring of 2024 we will follow up with a design studio. We will visit the southern coast of Puerto Rico with a cohort of 15 architecture students. to look at the ways in which this current colony of the United States has been coping with the twin challenges of climate change and economic austerity. Throughout the southern portion of the island, remnants of mass production haunt the island's coastal communities. Between oil refineries, power plants and abandoned sugar producing company towns, the southern coastline has turned into a sprawling museum of decaying structures around the estuaries, bays, and mangroves of



Aguirre Power Station, situated within the Aguirre Community. Photo by Pedro Cruz Cruz

Peñuelas, Salinas, Guayanilla, and Guánica. A particularly feral ecology where a resilient community survives, and bears witness to a history of boom and bust.

The years between 1950's and the 1970's are remembered as rollercoaster years in the development of the island. When these industries moved in, bought up land, extracted resources without concern to the island's ecosystems. For a short period, they also provided jobs, built factory towns and changed the predominantly rural culture of the south. In the wake of the petro-crisis of the twentieth century, these industries did what they are best known for in the island, pack up their services- lay off workers and leave the factories and compounds abandoned, unoccupied, and unmaintained.

Alongside these physical ruins is a fragile population of socially segregated and underfunded communities that had originally moved closer to work in the factories and haciendas. This largely forgotten section of the island exists in uneasy proximity to the water. As each hurricane season approaches, local populations are displaced, creating a fertile ground for real estate speculation. In the absence of much need resources and support from the government people have organized and survived through networks of care and mutual aid. In this context, an examination of the relationship between architecture, landscape, climate precarity and environmental justice is urgently needed. In the space of an architectural studio and seminar- we will reflect on the social implications of large-scale climate-related problems and consider the local strategies of repair, adaptation, and/or retreat. We will examine both the past and its potential futures by deploying the tools of drawing, anthropology, environmental history, ethnography, critical theory, and design. As the island of Puerto Rico continues to grapple with the effects of sea level rise, people will need to move towards a sustainable model of living while building on the cultures of self-reliance that they have already built. The deteriorating infrastructures of consumption/production will have to be either - reused, removed, or remade in a post-carbon era of new self-sustainable urbanism. Disruption will be seen positively in this curriculum as a critical response to the modernist demands of systemic control to be generalized or scaled up.

"From my analytical lens, I see everything as a great system, where each of the parts is related and it is not possible to separate human beings from the social system, the natural system or the economic system. Nor is it possible to understand in isolation how social, natural and economic capital operate. In other words, all these elements form a whole and understanding how they are related is one of the main objectives of planning."

-Lucilla Fuller Marvel, Anticipating Comprehensive and Fair Planning

OBJECTIVES

The concept for this course originates 5 years after the devastation of the island caused by the hurricanes Irma and Maria, and only one month after the 2022 Hurricane Fiona inundated the island's coastal communities.

In our research we will model scenarios for how a transition might occur and examine how such futures can create greater equity for communities that have been disproportionately affected by sea level rise. To do this we will think of ways to generate an architecture that situates culture within a milieu where ongoing uncertainty demands the re-thinking of existing building practices under the imminent threat of climate change. We will explore an interdisciplinary framework through which to approach the cultural, historical, and climatic stakes of the island. A studio and complimentary seminar will attempt to ask and answer existential and pragmatic questions back-to-back. For instance:

- How do groups and collectives organize themselves to live the turbulence and transformation in the Anthropocene age?
- What role might new modes of cohabitation in architecture play in imagining a future world as land becomes water?
- How do certain ways of drawing upon islands and island imaginaries stabilize, detour, or become disruptive in Anthropocene thinking?
- What happens to the many precarious communities impacted by the displacement of storm surges and sea level rise?
- How do we maintain, protect, or adapt the quickly disappearing legacy of coastal architecture in Puerto Rico?

There is a disconnect between communities, the assets they should rightfully control and resource management that bulldozes the socio-cultural possibilities for the sake of resilience and capital security. This lack of agreement between government, stakeholders, engineers, and designers of what should be done about the future of the island greatly affects those directly impacted by those decisions. But those decisions and conversations are always steered off by daunting regulations that impede more creative solutions. Interdisciplinary coworking with a strong emphasis on culture offers an opportunity to do so when people who have experienced these threats are offered a seat at the table.

COLLABORATION

The year-long design + research studio will be a cross-Atlantic dialog between faculty and students at the Spitzer School of Architecture at City College of New York, CUNY, the Escuela de Arquitectura at the University of Puerto Rico, the Polytechnique in San Juan, and The Pontifical Catholic University in Ponce. In addition, this multidisciplinary course will be conducted in collaboration with local organizations whose work focuses on art, activism, environmental justice, science, and community engagement. Possible sites for this research studio will include the Company town of Aguirre in Salinas, Tallaboa in Peñuelas, Villa del Carmen in Guayanilla, and Barrio Guaypao in Guánica.

We propose a unique model of inter-institutional and cross disciplinary approach to the curriculum. Students will partner in teams, or collectively with students and organizers in Puerto Rico to conduct contextual analysis with onsite collaborators and translators as needed.

A preliminary list of individuals and organizations that we are interested in partnering with in New York and Puerto Rico are as follows:

- Anyra Ramirez (Director, Marvel Architects) and José Juan Terrasa, (Director, Marvel Architects). Marvel Architects is an interdisciplinary design firm whose team includes generations of community planners, architects and designers that advocate for equity in Puerto Rico and New York.
- Libertad Guerra, Executive Director of the Clemente Center, a Latin X cultural space in the Lower East Side.
- Yarimar Bonilla, Director, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CCNY, CUNY. The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College is the largest university-based research institute, library, and archive dedicated to the Puerto Rican experience in the United States.
- Dr. Juan Lara, Professor of Economics, University of Puerto Rico. Professor Lara has conducted multiple studies on various sectors of the local economy, including housing demand, the construction industry, the financial sector, and the labor market.
- Institutions dedicated to ecological and community preservation through grass roots initiatives who practice decentralized and sovereign ways of building and producing. Some of these consist of the IDEBAJO in Aguirre (Community), Reserva Natural de Investigación at the Jobs Bay (Environmental), Casa Pueblo (Solar Energy), Punto Educativo, Recreativo y Social at Las Mareas (Community Development).
- The studio will actively encourage connecting through networks, archives and organizations on the island and diaspora that pursue research and records in policy, planning and design initiatives such as, the Dark Matter University network, the Puerto Rico Syllabus, Centro at Hunter College (CUNY), and the Archive of Architecture and Construction of the University of Puerto Rico (AACUPR).

"The era of planned misery and deliberately designed dependence is over. It's time to plan for joy and design for liberation. So that when the next storm comes — and it will — the winds will roar and the trees will bend, but Puerto Rico will show the world that it can never be broken" -Naomi Klein, "There's Nothing Natural About Puerto Rico's Disaster," The Intercept



Jacqueline Vazquez Community Leader of Las Mareas teaching about the history and current struggles in her neighborhood. Photo by Nandini Bagchee



Punto Recreativo y Social Community Center in Las Mareas next to the Jobs Bay Nature Reserve. Photo by Nandini Bagchee

COURSE READING MATERIAL:

Cultural Anthropology on Climate Change

- Arbino, D. (2021). "The Gifts of the Hurricane:" Reimagining Post-María Puerto Rico through Comics. *eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the Tropics*, 20(2), 156-179.
- Klein, Naomi (2018). *The Battle For Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*. Haymarket Books.
- Bonilla, Y. and Lebrón, M. Ed. (2019). *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Haymarket Books.
- Lapp, M. (1995). *The Rise and Fall of Puerto Rico as a Social Laboratory, 1945-1965*. *Social Science History*, 19(2), 169-199.
- Jorge Duany, *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States*
- Lebrón, Marisol (2021). *Against Muerto Rico: Lessons from the Verano Boricua*. Editora Emergente.
- Curbelo, S.A., (2001) *Un país del porvenir: El afán de modernidad en Puerto Rico (siglo XIX)*

Colonization and Puerto Rico

- López Bauzá (2018). *El Resplandor de Luzbella*. Editorial Planeta Mexicana.
- Immerwahr, D. (2019). *How to Hide an Empire: Geography, Territory, and Power in the Greater United States*.
- Pérez, E. (1999). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*. Indiana University Press.
- Ayala, C. J., & Bernabe, R. (2009). *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898*. Univ of North Carolina Press.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*.
- Zambrana, Rocío (2021) *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*. Duke University Press.
- Collins, Susan M., ed.(2006). *The Economy of Puerto Rico: Restoring Growth*. The Brookings Institution Press.
- Sepúlveda Rivera (2004). *Puerto Rico Urbano, Historic Atlas of the Puertorrican City*.

STUDIO ORGANIZATION

FALL 2023: ARCHIPELAGIC ESTATES OF PUERTO RICO

PROMPT 1: LAND + WATER | *Key Prompts: Colonization, Sovereignty, Climate, History*

During the introduction to the course, the students will attend lectures, meet in weekly seminars, and discuss assigned readings about the history, culture, politics, and planning processes in Puerto Rico. Through an invited guest lecture series coordinated in partnership with Marvel Architects and Centro in Hunter College, students will glean insights into the history of the island, its colonial and economic struggle, and its relationship with the larger Caribbean region. We will reflect on the longer history of the Island and what it means to survive in the currently compromised infrastructural state. We will examine the human and non-human dimensions of the eco system and see how various agents navigate the precariousness of life by the water.

PROMPT 2: PEOPLE + PLACE | *Key Prompts: Maps, Biodiversity, Flooding, Recreation, Documentation*

Students will be (remotely) introduced to various partners in Puerto Rico to dialog and to articulate a joint vision/mission. We will look at more established institutions as well as strategically establish contact with the many grass roots organizers working at the intersection of social, cultural, and environmental change. Researching via digitally accessible archives as well as GIS students will document sites as well as generate a narrative for potential transformation. Drawings, photo-essays, and videos will be the media for documentation. Through investigative journalism, physical engagement and archiving research, students, working in groups will identify and expand their understanding of a chosen research topic. Working collectively we will combine archived atlases, hand drawn maps and oral histories for documenting life along the water's edge.

SPRING 2024: ISLAND CULTURES

PROMPT 3: GROUNDED IN SITE | *Key Prompts: Oral History, Equity, Land use, Collective Exchange, Fieldwork*

At the start of the Spring Semester, students from New York will travel to Puerto Rico to conduct fieldwork and to meet with their partners. On-the-ground survey and active engagement we believe is an important component of our work as architects. Community workshops will be designed by the students in collaboration with local organizers. Travel to various sites and discussions with scholars and residents will help situate an architecture and planning strategy in the context of an amphibious/maritime culture. Each group will focus on a specific site within the larger area of interest and document it more closely looking at adjacencies, boundaries, structures, plants, rocks, and forms of life on the site. Students will also conduct oral histories of community leaders, public officials and residents to understand who/what currently occupies the lands. Based on this immersive experience and documentation of the place and people students will outline a program and strategy of transformation that considers the present and future needs of local stakeholders. Upon returning to the studio students will synthesize the fieldwork through critical visualization, mapping and situational media production, students will position themselves within an expanded field of urban practices that works to understand the "site" in multiple ways.

PROMPT 4: COLLECTIVE VISION | *Key Prompts: Resilience, Adaptation, Retreat*

The students will explore possible strategies and architectural proposals that would contribute to life in the southern communities of Puerto Rico. They will speculate on the future of the archipelago that continues to erode but where people still want to live, work and connect to the land and their natural resources. Thinking about the precarity of living in flood prone landscapes, each proposal will consider the relationship to water and seek to answer the following questions: How can architecture intervene/alter/adapt the landscape while dismantling the history of environmental racism in these sites? How can we design alongside organized action to change the material conditions that determine dependency? How does the post-carbon transition look like when we build culture alongside resilience?



Aguirre Central, standing as a figure of a haunting past of the decline of the sugar industry in the island. Photo by Pedro Cruz Cruz



Casa Pueblo's solar tree installation, standing for the organization's hopeful future in creating sustainable alternative economies. Photo by Pedro Cruz Cruz

"I saw you naked, I could see your whole being, now I could truly understand how beautiful and brave you are. You continue to fight, showing your claws for your people and showing the East and the West that you, PUERTO RICO, are the soul of your people, the star of the East that never goes out..."

- Mariola Cortés Cardona, *I saw you naked*.