

Flotsam, Jetsam and Foreign Cargo: American Architecture and Urbanism in Puerto Rico after 1898

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Puerto Rico's centennial celebrations of the Spanish American War of 1898 were held last year against a unique background: the island's contemporary urban landscape, customarily criticized as an unfortunate by-product of U.S. presence and preeminence on the Island for the last hundred years. — "*Isn't it true that common sense in construction was lost after the Americans arrived to our shores?*" Dramatic and demagogic, such statement bears witness to the Daltonism that weighs down architectural history in the Caribbean. Limiting the analysis of urban transformations to the conventional identification of filiations and specific influences clouds the complex, manifold cultural processes by which each and any city comes into being.

There is no doubt about the significant impact North America has exerted in the Puerto Rican landscape for the last century. However, deeper introspection is much needed for a truly incisive understanding of the many forces that came into play and the transformations they wrought. First, because Puerto Rico's twentieth-century metamorphoses have not been the only transformations experienced by this Antillean country; secondly, because the process of continuous change in the built domain — which even today goes on — includes each contemporary practitioner as a potential agent for development. From such a perspective, mediation (and meditation) regarding the built traces of American culture in Puerto Rico must transcend the notion of this heritage, to become instead an analysis of what the American legacy suggests. *To inherit* implies a passive role of acceptance: what is being handed down to you comes without you having had to act to achieve or deserve it. *To bequeath*, on the other hand, is an act of transmission that demands action. Contrary to what many people think, the social responsibility of the architect concerns legacy rather than heritage.

Falsely perceived, Architecture is often — and wrongly — relegated to the Art Historians' realm, depriving it of more complex and far-reaching range and scope. For many so-called "experts" the essence of Architecture lies mainly in the differentiation, for example, between the French, the English, or the German Gothic. How often the architect's responsibility is trivialized by hollow nomenclatures!... In the hands of such historians, the *art of building* becomes an issue of paternity suits: who influenced whom, and what inspired which. Such approach could prove to be as erratic as comparing two people solely on the looks of their external features. In spite of their physical similarities, each one incarnates influences, confluences, and attitudes of different origin and nature. The multiple and deeper circumstances that must come together for each unique personality to emerge, in most instances, escape easy recognition. As with people, with Architecture.

Puerto Rico's adoption of the ideals of the *Modern Movement* entailed major urban surgery; understanding how such transforma-

tion came to be makes necessary a 150-year backward glance. For the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, contemporary history seems to have begun in 1850, when the United States neutralized England's hegemony in the region by signing the *Clayton-Bulwer Treaty* with the British. Under this agreement, neither country would exercise exclusive control of the future Panama Canal. As a result, Great Britain's supremacy in the New World came to a halt, after having exerted ascending, extended domination in the region for a long while. It would take the United States another half century to convince its economic rival to sign the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty, which in 1901 granted the American nation exclusive rights over the canal, which was at the time only a project. Such developments sealed the destiny of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean for the twentieth century.

As documented by reputed historians, upon their arrival, the Americans first made their presence felt in the areas of health, education and religion. For a culture rurally inclined to sugar cane, coffee, and tobacco production these proved to be progressive concerns. However, we are not yet familiar with the specifics of how both the rural and urban realms were initially affected because traditionally, local historiography ignores explanations regarding spatial definition and related transformations. Economic, demographic, and social issues have customarily been addressed without acknowledging their direct consequences on habitable space. To this day, we remain in the dark about settlement patterns and specific relationships between architectural expression and various social groups; we lack in-depth comparisons between the properties and proportions of the public realm vis á vis the private domain. Questions proliferate. How did a specific housing typology for workers' quarters evolve in the area known as *Puertn de Tierra*? What sort of boundaries were acceptable in multi-family housing arrangements like *Tres Setos*, a complex with canals, bridges and a plaza, in the southern city of Mayagüez? How did the ideal of *city-in-the-park*, once accepted, become the reality of *city-in-the-parking*, so widely disseminated?

On the few occasions when the urban milieu warrants serious attention, descriptive imprecision weighs down any attempt at recording the changes experimented by Puerto Rico as a result of what Teddy Roosevelt called "the splendid little war." Noted native historian Fernando Picó, author of *1898: The War after the War*, is no exception:

The area at which local commanders excelled was urbanism. Many officials intervened in the towns' development, but reflecting their North American understanding of urban life... The spatial conceptions of the military challenged the premises under which leading social groups made use of the city.'

After such a statement full of interpretative possibilities, the historian offers no further explanations. Only adding that prostitutes, children, and vagrants now circulated in the streets, plazas, and other urban areas, which were formerly forbidden to them. About Yauco, an important coffee town, the author is more specific, pointing out that town improvements included "planting trees and gardens... the widening of streets and tidying up the plaza." What did such work imply in terms of: use and provenance of materials; specific designs; creative and compositional references; availability and type of workmanship; demolition and construction carried out; the formal nature of the spaces proposed; and other issues? María de los Angeles Castro, an expert on Puerto Rican colonial architecture, years ago admonished: "It is necessary to interweave theories and techniques pertaining historical methodology with the specifics of each discipline being explained, in our case, Architecture."¹

The Caribbean region needs more architects, engineers, planners, and urbanists interested in paying homage to *Clio*, the Muse of History. Only then will the urban enterprise of the last century — shared by Panama, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti — unravel more clearly. Sailing into modern times, each country has had to come to terms both with what has been appropriated and what has been rejected. The architectural legacy of the period has indeed been praised as jetsam, while simultaneously being slighted as flotsam, often as the result of undue fear of subjective optic immediacy. Said legacy now competes for the attention of a younger generation in search of its roots, including the non-Spanish and African ones. City segments that for years were disdained as *imported urbanism* or *foreign cargo*, are now the object of study and emulation, as the North American presence in Puerto Rican life ceases to be a challenge and becomes accepted as an everyday fact. Scorning contemporary suburban models as unarticulated and ineffective in social terms does not alter the fact that, "las casitas como cajitas de fósforos" (small houses resembling match boxes, as suburbia is often described) constitute the backdrop against which many Puerto Ricans have for decades, woven their lives, hopes, and experiences. How the smallest of the largest Antilles ceased to be a world of brick and wood-louvered galleries to become a universe of concrete with aluminum and glass windows is a key chapter in the Island's architectural history. The changes brought on by the Spanish-American War are still being felt. If for centuries Puerto Ricans erected party-wall buildings with patios, by now the country resembles an ocean of freestanding structures floating amidst expressways, parking lots, empty blocks and shopping malls. If building codes once endorsed the priority of the public realm, zoning legislation favoring individual rights has by now rendered them obsolete.

The first examples of American architecture on the Island, however, introduced an already familiar building vocabulary: the Neoclassical. Endorsing the style as "appropriate," and under the auspices of the United States (with matching funds and land provided by each municipality), a dynamic school-building program was implemented. Many of the new institutions were named after American statesmen such as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. Holidays honoring them were observed as occasions for the display of political loyalty to the United States. Schools were instrumental in teaching not only the American language, but also "Americanism." In 1921, Commissioner of Education Juan B. Huyke spoke of schools as agencies for the progress of Americanization. As early as 1902, another commissioner, Samuel M. Lindsay, had already described schools as "military barracks" for the peaceful colonization of the Island.² The American government was insistent on building "an American school at each valley and at each hill,"³ "with the building facing an important street,"⁴ making its presence hierarchically comparable to that of church and city hall in traditional towns.⁵ Social and political conditions have changed since this aggressive school-building program swept through Puerto Rico. But most of the structures survive to the present. Most importantly, they

continue unchallenged as the third-ranking monument in all towns, after churches and city hall. Collective memory after 1898 recognizes them unabashedly as such.

In spite of the rush with which the government set out to build these educational facilities, many of them turned out to be superb architectural examples whose siting, design, and detailing are all worthy of recognition. Ponce High School, one of the earliest to be erected, remains to this day a landmark of good craftsmanship, careful massing, and extraordinary spatial sophistication. Even if heavily influenced on the exterior by McKim, Mead and White, the spatial sequence from portico to lobby, library, and auditorium reflects a mature design hand at work. Central High School, in San Juan, shared with its counterpart in Ponce an equally complex building program: in addition to classrooms and hallways, it included an ample lobby, generous stairs, a library, a gym, and a small theater. Even if these two schools are among the most important public buildings ever built in Puerto Rico, Central High claimed the more contemporary expression. Its façade treatment with ornament detached from the more abstract plane behind signaled a search for more pared-down expression.

Funding for construction of public schools was provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the agency also responsible for building highways, bridges, and other public works throughout the Island. One of the most distinguished figures to work for the U.S. government in its program to build schools in Puerto Rico was American Adrian C. Finlayson, an alumnus of Syracuse University. His extensive architectural legacy includes some of the most highly regarded institutional buildings on the Island, projects that are unsurpassed in the rest of the Hispanic Caribbean. Santurce's Central High School was done under Finlayson's aegis at the Department of the Interior. Among others, he designed the Román Baldorioty de Castro Grade and Technical School in Old San Juan, and the Rafael M. Labra Grade School in San Juan. Preserved to this day, "*La Labra*," as it is commonly called, constitutes a unique example of Georgian style and brick construction on the Island. Its masonry detailing, slightly sunken patio, cloister-like appearance, and square cupola constructed in wood contribute a distinctive character to the Island's architectural repertoire.

During the 1920s, the Spanish Revival reintroduced, via Miami and California, a vocabulary already familiar to the Caribbean: stuccoed walls, terracotta tiled roofs, wrought iron, and colored glass. The two masterpieces of the period, although somewhat late, are both "castles" evocative of William Randolph Hearst's estate by the Pacific Coast in California: the *Castillo Serrallés*, in Ponce, and the *Castillo de Mario Mercado*, in Guayanilla. Local architects Pedro de Castro (Syracuse) and Francisco Porrata Doria (Cornell) designed them. Each of these villas sits on a hill overlooking the adjoining town and nearby sea. The spectacular siting, isolated on lots that know no end, reinforces the sculptural quality of the structures. At first, whim and effect seem to have guided the design. However, both examples evidence a spatial articulation unsurpassed by other residential projects on the Island or, for that matter, any of Addison Mizner's comparable revival efforts in Florida. Examples like these *castillos* should encourage a new reading of the Spanish Revival in Puerto Rico as a style concerned with space as an abstract element, and not just a trifling or perfunctory expression. St. Petersburg's Casa Coe da Sol could be said to share a parti with the Castillo Serrallés, and the *William M. Wood* house in Palm Beach bears some similarities to the Castillo de Mario Mercado. But neither of the two Mizner projects can claim as elaborate or fully developed a spatial sequence as their Puerto Rican counterparts.

Not until the 1930s did Puerto Rico experience a truly new style, when the building boom that came with the New Deal pursued a renewed expression through the appropriation of *Art Deco* and the growth of the concrete industry on the Island, sponsored by the local government. Through the Federal Government, emergency relief funds were channeled into the construction of city halls, hospitals,

gas and telegraph stations and, of course, schools. Private enterprise mirrored the Streamline Moderne style in moviehouses (the *Metro* and the *Fox*); hotels (the *Normandie*); and apartment buildings (the *Miami* in the Condado area of San Juan). Progress and modernity — which the turn of the century had already ushered as discourse — made themselves at home.

Unfortunately, some of our best *Deco* surprises are not easy to access and enjoy. The city of Ponce, for example, hides its many jewels: the terrazzo flooring depicting a martini with an olive (Pou Residence); the green and orange patterns in an overflowing stair (Rañal de Lugo House); and the triple-edged comers in several mausoleums at the city's cemetery. Ponce is, after all, our best *Deco* showcase. Its imposing marketplace knows no equal in the Caribbean., The *Plaza del Mercado*, by Pedro Méndez, another Syracuse graduate, boasts a layered facade whose rich depth effect is achieved within only approximately eight inches. Other *Deco* architects of the period also received formal training in institutions like Rensselaer, MIT, and Cornell, but Porrata Doria outshone them all. His best designs include the *Yordán Residence*, which boasts a Moorish-inspired bathroom and the Twentieth Century Fox Theatre, already mentioned, with an open patio that performs as an urban lobby. Also of significance is Casa Vidal, a typological reinterpretation of a 19th Century residential prototype, high on a plinth, with a spectacular dining room culminating the entry sequence. In most cases, the modern accent on structures never transcended disguise. Traditional ideas ruled both architectural composition and urban strategies.

Architectural education in Puerto Rico was much delayed in coming. As of today, it remains a North American phenomenon in form, contents, and aspirations. During Spanish colonial times, no school akin to Madrid's San Fernando Academy ever materialized. It was necessary for the change of flags to occur — and in fact, more than half a century after it took place — before Puerto Rico could claim an architecture school of its own. Cornell assisted in the early stages of our very own Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, founded in 1965. Much later, in 1992, a pre-architecture program opened at Interamerican University in San Germán, modeled after the first two years of the curriculum at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. More recently, in 1995, *The New School of Architecture at Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico* opened, challenging the existing options and their pedagogical approaches. Its faculty was, almost in its entirety, trained *en los Estados Unidos* but, in contrast (and in parallel), pursues concerns of singular local value: identity, Neocolonialism, and the pertinence of Modernity as condition, discourse, and/or myth.

Throughout its different projects for progress — whether *New Deal* in the 1930s or *Operation Bootstrap* in the 1950s — Puerto Rico seems always to have been compelled to "keep up with the times," particularly in architectural and urban terms. Local author José Luis González has insisted that by imposing English as a second language, the US made viable our communication with the English-speaking Caribbean. In the same way, it must be recognized that the building boom sponsored by American interests on the Island, ultimately made familiar the vocabulary, contributions, and experience of the Modern Movement. Today, ironically, the implementation and ultimate consequences of such a process render Puerto Rico closer to Latin America than North America.

Imagine, for a moment, the chance to visit two hotels, both very popular and chic during the 1950s, when they were built: the *Humboldt* in Caracas, Venezuela, and the *Intercontinental* in Ponce, Puerto Rico. The first lies abandoned, enjoying decay, greeted daily by the clouds at *Cerro del Avila*, the mountain on which it sits. The second sunbathes unattended at *El Vigía*, the hill where during colonial times men watched for incoming ships loaded with gold and supplies. Both structures fuel the same question. Given their short life span as useful buildings — and measured against the time, effort, and money their construction entailed — one must ask, is there reason for Modernity when and where it cannot outlive as such? At

this point in time — and in that part of the world shared by Venezuela and Puerto Rico (but also Cuba, Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic) — it is impossible to maintain and even more difficult to transcend the barrage of false aspirations inherited from the Modern Movement. Meanwhile, progress purely interested in profits cripples us in ways our Northern neighbors choose to ignore. So, to our North American friends we say, you are to be credited, but also to be blamed. True, the United States catapulted Puerto Rico into modern times, but other countries experienced Modernism at the same time, and without Uncle Sam's help. In short, we are grateful, but we are not in debt.

Merit, however, must be awarded to several works of consequence which joined the Puerto Rican urban landscape because of the U.S.: Banco Popularis Tower in Old San Juan (the Island's first skyscraper); the Rum Pilot Plant for studies on rum quality (located in what are now the Botanical Gardens); the paired buildings for the Teachers' Association (with canopies and a reflecting pool); Ashford Medical Center (sleek, slender and boasting a delicate brise-soleil); also the low-rise housing complex west of Ponce, called *Morel Campos*. With single-family dwellings in party-wall conditions, public and service alleys, vaguely nautical motifs, and simple massing in concrete, *Morel Campos* was our last traditional housing complex. *Urbanización Roosevelt* in San Juan could be thought of as its fraternal twin, yet never an identical one. Both were built after the Depression. The same housing units and vocabulary used at Morel were repeated at *Roosevelt*, but in a detached arrangement, units became objects, heralding the future saga of suburbia. The following chapters of this failed adventure are well known: in Puerto Rico they are extended single-family home developments called *University Gardens*, *Hyde Park*, *Valle Arriba Heights* or *Reparto Apolo*, and more recently, *Los paseos*, *La encantada* or *Cambridge Park*. Exurbia is, by now, endemic to the culture.

To this day — and in spite of it all — the Spanish Caribbean still hopes for an urban life of improved quality, one capable of embracing and making the most of a complex and contradictory heritage. To find refuge in past traditions is as naïve as censoring the present uncritically. Neither omissions nor exclusions are, at this point in time, excusable. Proper recognition of what the United States has left as cargo in the Antilles is, in a way, urgent. Architecture, in fact, can prove to be an effective prism to reflect and refract the multiple experiences of a culture honest in its aspiration to understand how one hundred years ago, a war grafted us into the modern world.

On the eve of the millenium, next December 31st, 1999, the Canal Zone will be returned to Panama; England, on the other hand, has already surrendered Hong Kong to the Chinese. What these events will eventually mean for the Caribbean Basin (and its cities) remains to be seen. In the meantime, long-gone worlds of coffee, sugar cane, and tobacco remain elusive, if not completely invisible for a younger generation of Puerto Ricans, as well as Cubans and Dominicans, it must be said. For this group of people from which change will eventually come — ecologically concerned, believers in the Green Movement — the loss of trees, and not traditions, seems after all, or for the moment, a more pressing subject.

NOTES

- ¹ Fernando Picó, *1898: la guerra después de la guerra* (Rio Piedras: Huracán, 1987), pp. 185-86.
- ² Maria de los Angeles Castro, "Arquitectura y sociedad: San Juan tras la fachada" (siglos XVI-XIX), in *Op. Cit.*, Num. I, 1985-86, 38.
- ³ Aida Negrón de Montilla, *La americanización de Puerto Rico y el sistema de instrucción pública, 1900-1930* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Universitaria, 1977), p. 78.
- ⁴ Negrón de Montilla, p. 72.
- ⁵ Negrón de Montilla, p. 60.
- ⁶ In "Recent Civic Architecture in Puerto Rico," *Architectural*

Record 48 (1920): 137, Sylvester Baxter underlines the relevance of the new educational structures when describing schoolhouses as "usually the most important building in the place, even outranking the parish church."

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