

Anonymous Architecture: The Modern Movement's First (and Last) Attempts at Traditional Urbanism in the Caribbean

JOSÉ LORENZO TORRES

Universidad Politécnica de Puerto Rico

A man who understands his native land to be a reflection of himself, is one day overcome by curiosity. It may be that he has come across some ruins, heard an old man's yarn, or simply read something provocative about his own land. Curiosity then begins to roam: *What was that all about? How did all things come to be as they are now?*

— Luis González y González, *Invitation to Micro history*¹

Customarily, most explanations of Caribbean architecture refer to the ideal Renaissance cities as precedent and basic reference to understand the development of urbanism in the region. Grids, checkerboard patterns, and repetitive blocks, as originally proposed, purported to grant these new settlements a sense of *order* and *stability*, two words which in the Caribbean — given its social and political history — to this day lack much trust, support or track record.

For in fact, ideal cities never made it to this side of the world. In many ways, “la città nuova” that Sir Thomas More’s, *Utopia*, or Plato’s *Republic* argued for, remained a dream rather than a reality in Latin America. The initial, rigid layout was never finished, but desecrated in numerous occasions; edge conditions challenged most assumptions; economic bliss remained a vision without veracity, and lots never densified as originally conceived.² Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize winner in literature from the Island of St. Lucia, described the ambitions of our unfinished cities and their “unrealized, homiletic conclusion.” Interestingly enough, the poet from the Lesser Antilles, added: “*the Caribbean city may conclude just at that point where it is satisfied with its own scale, just as Caribbean culture is not evolving, but already shaped... A culture, we all know, is made by its cities.*”³

By endorsing the region’s built landscape as *is*, Walcott transcends traditional, run-of-the-mill valorizations of local architecture and its intentions. Much too often, so-called scholars have insisted on reducing our building commitment in the Antilles to an act of mere imitation, stylistic envy or economic deprivation. As a third-year architecture student, enrolled in a required course entitled *Mid Career Research*, the possibilities of casting off these limiting historiographic stances became a challenge to be met through independent research of buildings I have chosen to group and label “*Anonymous Architecture.*”

The buildings included in the category of “*anonymous architecture*” share uncommon lot conditions. Land tenure and subdivision, after all, have played a significant role in determining the shape and face of cities, the Caribbean being no exception.⁴ Incremental urban development has generated gaps and overlaps that have required different levels of resolution within the built domain. At its most basic, this problem influences the formal character of lots within the blocks, especially their size and shape. Regular lots, in general, are orthogonal or rectangular in shape, with one shorter side laid out

parallel to the street, and approximately proportioned 1:1.5. Irregular lots are, customarily, triangular or trapezoidal. For the purposes of this study, thin rectangular plots whose longitudinal axis lines up along the street also fit into the category.

The siting of buildings on irregular parcels often generates idiosyncratic building solutions.⁵ In the Caribbean, little attention has been paid to the subject.⁶ However, Puerto Rico’s current (and critical) urban condition underlines the need to determine renewed strategies for development, taking into account both the value and potential of those lots of land which, until now, had been discarded as oddly-shaped or merely reduced to the status of “remnants” of the city. Early Modern architecture in the Hispanic Caribbean, as evidenced by recent research⁷, tackled the problem with confidence, but also with a degree of naivete. The latter may account for the fact that the most representative built examples of the region remain to this day “anonymous” to our cities’ urban history.

The term “anonymous architecture,” as coined for the purposes of my research, transcends the mere recognition of non-descript buildings whose authorship is impossible to establish. More specifically, the definition here advocated encompasses medium-scale buildings — two to four storeys dedicated principally to housing — custom-fitted into their lots, yet adhering — albeit in novel ways — to traditional frontage principles. Most, indeed, lack the signature of any recognized designer, but these *sine auctore* structures constitute urban gestures of considerable meaning, at formal as well as social levels, mirroring both the physical and cultural contexts in which they are inserted. Notable examples in Puerto Rico, include *Consuelo Apartments* in Hyde Park, Río Piedras, the longitudinal complex at *Avenida Ponce de León* and the corner of *Bouret Street* in Santurce and a pair of structures at *Feria 1464*, bordering Barrio Hipódromo all in the capital city of San Juan. Other cities on the Island also claim familiarity with these prototypical buildings. Their manipulation of scale and space seems a most pertinent one today, when peripheral Third-World countries vehemently pursue the reasonable/feasible scale at which urbanism is possible in their particular contexts. Deciphering *anonymous architecture* may yield a more accessible future city, even if not an “ideal” one. This quality of “anonymity” must also be credited for underlining the potential of densifying leftover, unused spaces in today’s cities, pursuing a synthetic use of stylistic/ornamental elements and exploring complex compositional strategies that simultaneously pertain to dual frontages and local symmetries.

Nietzsche’s categorization of historians proves to be useful for the task of studying these secondary-role structures, particularly in terms of the distinction he establishes between “monumental” and “archaeological.” The philosopher, attracted by what is minor and focused, defined the archaeological historian as some one who “with loyalty and concern looks back to one’s own native land.”⁸ In the case

of Latin America, Nietzsche's ideas could be said to have nurtured a substantial body of microhistories considered to be a discipline of their own. Its best known exponent is Mexican historian Luis González y González. Author of the much referenced *Pueblo en vilo*, González y González' framework of analysis proves useful for an extended application to Architecture, especially for the study of subjects with limited, yet clearly-defined scope, where "The relevance of research does not rely on the size of the object of study, but rather in the small scale and cohesion of what is being analyzed, the minuscule approach to what is being told, and the myopic optics applied."⁹

To date, unfortunately, attempts at explaining the impact of the Modern Movement in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean have largely suffered from rampant gigantism. While Roberto Segre, the Cuban critic, and Roberto Cassá, the Dominican historian, subordinate all phenomena to the rise of Capitalism, Enrique Vivoni, founder of the Puerto Rican Architecture Archives, dismembers the period into "great men" as key figures.¹⁰ In between, something is lost: the goal of understanding the micro phenomenon as a universe unto itself "...even if Micro history disregards those events which seem to make waves, its concerns, nonetheless, facilitate a deeper understanding of everyday life in ways that elude Macro history."¹¹

Anonymous architecture buildings in Puerto Rico substantiate the validity of the micro historic stance. Their study must not be seen as one reduced to exalting individual buildings beyond their actual importance, just because they perform, with efficacy, a supporting role in the city. Instead, the reassessment propounded here aims at an all-inclusive revalorization of local architecture as "*arquitectura matria*," one capable of representing themes and realizations, but also possibilities and expectations of pertinence to the culture of the region.¹² Could this backward glance be censored as nostalgia for all things irretrievable, or reduced to mere affinity for fashionable concerns regarding early Modernism? Maybe so. Even if partly so, nostalgia tempered by self-acknowledged attempts at objectivity often succeeds as criticism, avoiding mere legitimization.

Puerto Ricans often reminisce about the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in the Caribbean.¹³ During those years, architecture both endorsed and transcended the Spanish Revival idiom.¹⁴ In parallel, the Modern Movement was making its presence felt, largely fueled by institutional buildings that appropriated the streamline *moderne* expression following the Great Depression and Roosevelt's New Deal reconstruction policies. Schools, movie houses, and government agencies paved the way as the model for many upper-class single-family residences to be built in the new, "daring, dynamic" style. Clarity in orthogonal massing, the abstraction of ornament, and cultural associations with progress served as catalysts for the adoption, adaptation, and endless dilution of Art Deco ideas. It did not take long for this language to become *lingua franca* throughout the Hispanic Caribbean, coinciding with the moment at which cities were expanding their housing stock by building apartments – if not yet great numbers of houses nor towers – in low-scaled structures to lodge a growing middle class. After the Great Depression, Puerto Rico enjoyed renewed political conditions which fostered a significant demographic growth, an upturn in the economy, the college education of a large segment of the population, and an emerging real estate market as a by product of it all.¹⁵

As a result of the rural migrations to the city that occurred throughout the region from the 1920s through the 1940s, capitals and other important cities densified and expanded.¹⁶ San Juan, Puerto Rico, extended outward in a linear manner, with growth occurring along Avenida Ponce de León and Avenida Fernández Juncos. Ponce de León followed the path of the original road that has led inland from the old city of San Juan since Spanish colonial times. It was predictable that development would eventually occur along its route, with Avenida Fernández Juncos as an auxiliary parallel. Specific areas of the capital city, accessible by way of these arteries, were subjected to a significant urban transformation. Three of these



Fig. 1. 1464 Avenida B, corner of Feria; Barrio Hipodromo, Santurce.



Fig. 2. Avenida Borinquen, corner Quiñones Street #1961; Barrio Obrero, Santurce.

areas pursued an architecture of a larger-than-merely-residential scale: *Hipódromo, Barrio Obrero* (known to some as East Santurce, extending to the *Sagrado Corazón* sector),¹⁷ and *Santa Rita*, in Río Piedras, including neighborhoods adjacent to the University of Puerto Rico campus.

Barrio Hipódromo sits south of Avenida Fernández Juncos, encompassing fourteen blocks comprised mainly of one-story single-family houses. Structures facing the larger streets (locally referred to as "avenues," even if not rightly so) claim hierarchical presence, becoming multi-family dwellings two to three storeys high. Two examples must be singled out: 1) 1464 Avenida B, corner of Feria, and 2) 1460 Fernández Juncos, corner Avenida B. Both incorporate the idiom of the Spanish Revival, but as *appliqué* over what are meant to be read primarily as bare surface.¹⁸ The structure at 1464 consists of a three-storey apartment building with a courtyard and built-in garages beneath. Its main facade is stepped positioned diagonally in relation to the street on its side elevation. Four pilasters



Fig. 3. Avenida Ponce de León, corner of Buret #557; Sagrado Corazón, Santurce.

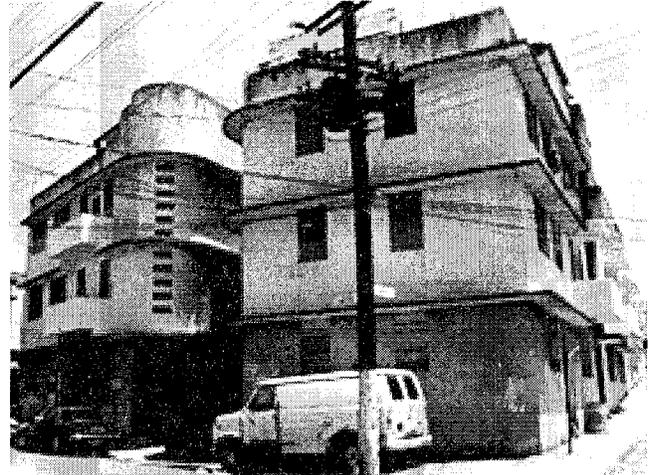


Fig. 4. 15 Celis Aguilera Street, corner Fernández Pabún; Santa Rita, Río Piedras.

at the entrance suggest a monumental order and scale, yet the third storey is recessed to minimize its size. Its neighbor one block away, the second example, faces Fernández Juncos, but acknowledges the importance of the two thoroughfares it faces. Two storeys high, its stepped volumes evince a clear preference for a more residential scale. Both buildings at *Hipódromo* demonstrate facility with the handling of a large mass through effective articulation of volumes, voids, and fenestration; because of their unique corner exposures, these structures manage to become sculptural presences, while respecting traditional frontage conditions.

Barrio Obrero, like *Hipódromo*, was conceived to house the migrant population pouring into San Juan from rural areas. From 1920 onward, both single and multi-family housing dominated its many blocks of sometimes minuscule lots.¹⁹ Buildings of more importance – with larger plots devoted to mixed-use – faced main avenues, claiming their presence and a bigger scale than those at *Hipódromo*. Abundant commercial space at the ground level responded to the greater density and traffic of this *barrio*. The resultant architecture of the area, not surprisingly, becomes more compact and resolute with respect to lot lines, unit plans, and circulation. The building at *Avenida Borinquen*, corner *Quiñones Street #1961* (insert Figure 2 here), and another at Cayey Street, corner of William Jones Street, best exemplify it. At #1961 a block culminates in a triangular site, reaching three storeys high at the apex, but dropping to two levels at the base, where it joins, in party-wall, a neighboring building of similar size. The latter enjoys formal access to the rooftop of the former. Similar site conditions characterize the building at *Cayey Street*, corner of *William Jones*, which incorporates balconies, a terrace, and chamfered facade at its uppermost level. It was designed by architect Luis Perocier, who was also responsible for several other mixed-use buildings along Borinquen Avenue.²⁰

A few blocks away, one finds *Avenida Ponce de León*, corner of *Bouret #557*, where three floors of uncommonly attenuated proportions adapt to a sloping, wedge-shaped site, with balconies so light that they appear to be hanging from the more solid walls. The wraparound facade is articulated with a rhythmic alteration of the receding and projecting sections of the building's mass.

Santa Rita – the last area of San Juan to be examined here – developed as a residential extension of the town of Río Piedras, where Puerto Rico's first university was located in 1902 and has remained as the main center of post-secondary education on the island. The market for housing has always been active here. Nearby neighborhoods of similar scale and character include Hyde Park, Santa Ana, Blondet, Capetillo Arriba, Ubarri, and Mora. The general population refers collectively to many of them as *Santa Rita*.

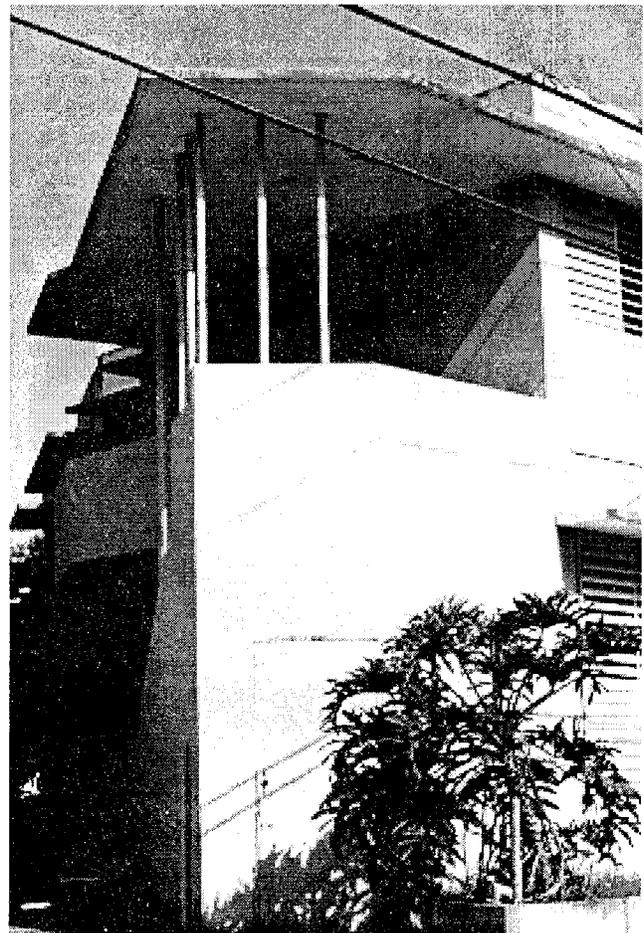


Fig. 5. 870 Esteban González. Santa Rita, Río Piedras.

A significant concentration of examples of anonymous architecture can be found here. *1006 Peregrina Street* accommodates what would have been a symmetrical scheme into an asymmetrical site, with the ensuing adaptations propitiated by a long, thin site accessed from its cross axis, with a triangular section on one side. The *Consuelo Apartments at 165 Los Mirtos* open their trapezoidal mass to enclose a central space from which a freestanding sculptural stair leads to the roof terrace. Wide, ample, curved balconies are repeated at each side

of the symmetrical axis that regulates the scheme.

However, Santa Rita's truly distinguishing examples consist of buildings whose volumes are articulated into two independent, yet related components. These are different in size, shape, and orientation, but are linked to one another by a shared space and extended balconies. Most notable are *Celis Aguilera #15*, University Avenue Apartments, and *Esteban González #870*. The floor plans of individual units are varied, adding special interest to the diverse living conditions in Santa Rita.²¹ Most facades emphasize the horizontal axis. Given the extension of these buildings along the street, anonymity is hereby granted by virtue of continuity.

The architecture of the foregoing examples involves more complex siting and compositional issues. Other examples outside San Juan deserve attention as well. They represent formal variations on the theme, but also bespeak of the intention of secondary cities to pursue a larger urban scale. In Ponce, *Edificio Julita*, at Salud #63 exalts the malleability of concrete in a parti that incorporates a symmetrical lateral elevation into an enhanced chamfered condition, all expressed in the language of *Art Deco*. In Aguadilla, four blocks away from the town's center, three similar buildings, tall and svelte, highlight the urban character of an intersection, the last episode before the traditional texture dissolves into freestanding structures. Lares, Mayaguez and Arecibo also feature anonymous architecture within their extant grid plans.

Our object of study is also present in other Caribbean cities like Havana and Santo Domingo. Future research is aimed at documenting relevant comparable structures at these nuclei, as well as in Latin American cities like Caracas, *Ciudad de Mexico*, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, among others. These centers have revealed both historical and contemporary examples akin to the object of my study. As just one example of a recent effort, one could mention Alberto Kalach's *Rodin Building at Colonia Nochebuena*, 1991-93, at the heart of Mexico City.²² Prototypical urban conditions that pertain to anonymous architecture continue to be confronted throughout the world. That in itself would be enough to justify paying close attention to its precedents, as here advocated. Even if the merits of these anonymous buildings comprise urban, spatial, stylistic, and compositional concerns, more specifically, this legacy of the Modern Movement, is to be credited for:

- Endorsing a feasible urbanism at a scale relative to the economic possibilities and aspirations of not only the Caribbean region, but other regions and countries.
- Underlining and demonstrating the potential for densifying left-over, unused spaces in today's cities.
- Pursuing synthesis in the use of stylistic elements in a restrained, economic manner, while endowing a building with a significant urban presence.
- Exploring relatively complex, compositional strategies pertaining, simultaneously, to dual frontage and local symmetries.

Consideration of past achievements (the big events, the small gestures) transcends the mere recording of events past, to expound societal imperatives that do not always make themselves outright evident in daily life. Even if sometimes relegated to a background, these imperatives are capable of representing who we are, as well as who we were: "The best investigation of a distant past can also be an exercise in self-understanding."²³ For years now, architectural criticism on the Caribbean has focused mainly on the inheritance of Renaissance ideas and ideals. The region must now look elsewhere, not in imitation or derision of the past, but in acceptance of the values inherent to its own cultural expressions, one of them being architectural anonymity.

NOTES

¹ Luis González y González, *Invitación a la microhistoria* (Mexico: Clio, 1997), my translation.

² Marvin Trachtenberg, in "The Euclidean Piazza," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 1977), pp. 72-73, has already addressed the issue of "models that often have introduced unforeseen disorder," but not in reference to contemporary urbanism.

³ Derek Walcott, *Nobel Literature Prize Acceptance Speech*, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992).

⁴ Francisco Moscoso, *Lucha agraria en Puerto Rico, 1541-1545; un ensayo de historia* (San Juan, P.R.: Puerto, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1997).

⁵ Steven Holl, in *Pamphlet Architecture #5, #9* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), addresses the topic with respect to architecture in North America.

⁶ Typological concerns in Puerto Rico, for example, have focused on the building as object, rather than pursuing an explanation of typologies in the physical and social context in which they are situated. See Rafael Pumarada, Balcón, sala y comedor: la tipología de la vivienda en San Germán, in *Plástica 15* (September 1986), pp. 68-72; Jorge Rigau, *Puerto Rico 1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

⁷ Magazines like *Arquitexto* and *Archivos de Arquitectura Antillana*, from the Dominican Republic, have examined the work of significant architects of the period like Guillermo González and Tomás Auñón, among others.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *De la utilidad y los inconvenientes de los estudios históricos para la vida*. (Buenos Aires: Bajel, 1945), p. 25.

⁹ Luis González y González, *Invitación a la microhistoria* (Mexico: Clio, 1997), p. 14.

¹⁰ Roberto Segre, *Historia de la arquitectura y el urbanismo: América Latina y Cuba* (Havana: Pueblo y Educación, 1986). Roberto Cassá, *Historia social y económica de la República Dominicana*. (Santo Domingo, D.R.: Alfa y Omega, 1985). Enrique Vivoni Farage, et al., *Antonín Nechodoma: umbral para una nueva arquitectura caribeña* (Río Piedras, P.R.: AACUPR, 1989).

¹¹ González y González, *Invitación a la microhistoria*, p. 27.

¹² González y González, *Invitación a la microhistoria*, p. 16. The author makes a distinction between macro history as that pertaining an understanding of country as "Fatherland," and micro history being more akin to the concept of "Motherland," resting on the obvious differentiation.

¹³ For reference in varied fields, see the following: in literature, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, *La memoria rota* (Río Piedras, Huracán, 1994). In film, *La gran fiesta* directed by Marcos Zurinaga, 1991; in photography, *Jack Delano, Nuestro* (Banco Popular de Puerto Rico, 1997); in music, television specials sponsored by Banco Popular de Puerto Rico: *Un pueblo que canta* (1993), *El espíritu de un pueblo* (1994), *Somos un solo pueblo* (1995), *Al compás de un sentimiento* (1996), *Siempre piel canela* (1997), *Romance del cumbanchero* (1998); in architecture, *Hispanophilia*, Enrique Vivoni-Farage and Sylvia Álvarez-Curbelo, eds. (Río Piedras: Universitaria, 1998).

¹⁴ For an understanding of the process, see Rigau, *Puerto Rico 1900*, and *Hispanophilia*.

¹⁵ Eduardo Rivera Medina and Rafael L. Ramírez, *Del cañaveral a la fábrica: cambio social en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Huracán, 1994).

¹⁶ Fernando Picó, *Historia general de Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Huracán, 1992).

¹⁷ For a brief, yet succinct history and description of the area of Santurce, see Leon Krier, *Completar Santurce: Estudio Preliminar para el Plan Maestro de un Barrio* (San Juan: Oficina de Asuntos Urbanos, Oficina del Gobernador, La Fortaleza, 1988).

¹⁸ Jorge Rigau, "Benina's Lamp and the Glamour of Ostentation in the Hispanic Caribbean," in *Hispanophilia*, p. 96.

¹⁹ Luis Rodríguez, *Residential Typological Studies: San Juan, Puerto Rico* (Boston: n.p., 1978).

²⁰ Luis Perocier, turn-of-the-century architect, designed structures

in the town and university campus of Mayaguez, also authoring *Mansión Lassisse*, an imposing suburban villa at the outskirts of Sabana Grande. Although a secondary figure of his period, in a way, Perocier becomes an exception to the rule regarding the “anonymity” of the buildings being here examined. The argument is thus being made, as is the case for most of the other samples, for the anonymous *character* of structures bowing down to the prevailing character of the city they serve.

- ²¹ Santa Rita, once a middle class district is now mostly populated by college students, but retains a mixed character as it also includes recent migrants to the Island.
- ²² Kalach + Alvarez, *Contemporary World Architects* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Rockport, 1995), pp. 68-75.
- ²³ Richard Jenkyns, “Ancient Evenings” review of *Courtesans & Fishcakes*, by James N. Davidson, *New York Review of Books* (September 8, 1998), p. 18.

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