

Neo-Colonial Architecture and the Neo-Architecture of Colonialism

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INTRODUCTION:

When architects and developers engage in global practice, the results can be more than inappropriate. Often they can inadvertently reinforce cultural and economic colonization. A case in point is the tourist development being carried out in the Condado district of San Juan. Here, the intention is to replace the modernist icon, the Hotel La Concha with a Disneyesque, neo-colonial, mission style mega-plex. Among the justifications propounded by the development team is that this complex would be "more Puerto Rican." The irony is that this proposal replicates an invented style imposed on the Island after the Spanish American conquest. The existing hotel, in contrast, represents the first efforts by local architects to develop an architecture truly appropriate to the Island. While it may use the vocabulary of modernism as its means of expression, it is a more authentic architectural expression of local conditions.

"NEO-COLONIAL" ARCHITECTURE

The domination of Puerto Rico by Spain created an architecture which was primarily generated by military and defense concerns. The result was a stylistic consistency dominated by austerity both in the public and private realms. It can be defined as neoclassical, although very sober in expression.¹

A construction boom followed the conquest of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898, which was met by bringing or employing architects from the U.S. These architects in turn brought with them a new "style" useful to the political agenda of the U.S., which recognized the Island as part of an expanding economic sphere that while it belonged to the U.S., was not a part of the U.S. This style involved the "appropriation of the Hispanic element by the culture of the United States itself."² Thus the architecture of the Spanish Revival styles brought to Puerto Rico at this time became a cultural device for the colonization of the Island by the U.S.

The invasion brought with it not only a new architectural expression, but also a total cultural transformation through the restructuring of the educational system, civil administration, and the imposition of "imperialistic" capitalism.³ That the Spanish Revival styles, especially that of Mission Revival,

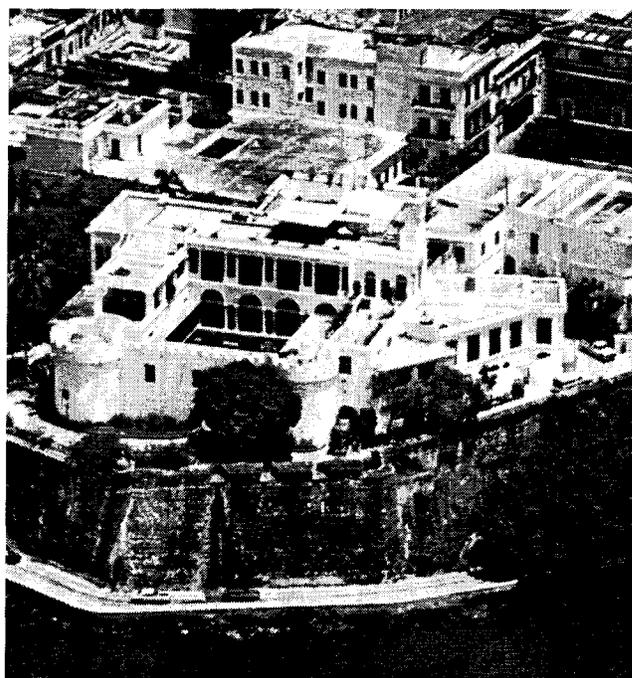


Figure 1. La Forteleza, Viejo San Juan.



Figure 2. San Jose Church, Viejo San Juan.

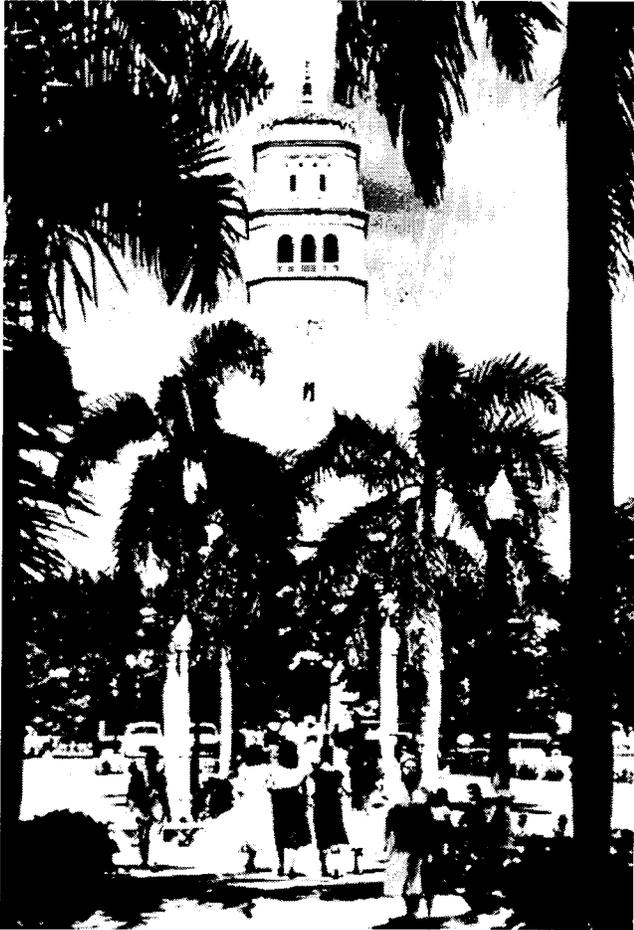


Figure 3. Tower of the University of Puerto Rico. Río Piedras

became the tool of the new power structure being imposed, is clearly seen in the buildings created in this image: Protestant and Methodist churches on an island predominantly Catholic; administrators' residences for U.S. sugar corporations; the new University of Puerto Rico constructed on lands of the United Fruit Company; and, among others, the offices for the electric company in Mayaguez. The Mission Revival, a style which in California reflected the filtering of Spanish influences through indigenous realities, transformed itself into a more elaborate, ornamented architecture that reflected more directly a European influence. This was the architecture of bourgeois and nouveau-riche Anglo-Americans, popular in places like Miami and St. Augustine. The assimilation of Hispanic tradition into an American architectural expression clearly signaled not the subordination of Hispanic cultural values in Puerto Rico but their becoming nothing more than a picturesque background against which the United States' political and economic interests would be played out.

THE HOTEL "LA CONCHA" PROJECT:

The Hotel "La Concha" was designed during the middle of the 1950s and opened in 1958. During this period, the area in which it was located, the islet of Condado, near the original historic Spanish city center of "Viejo San Juan," was predomi-

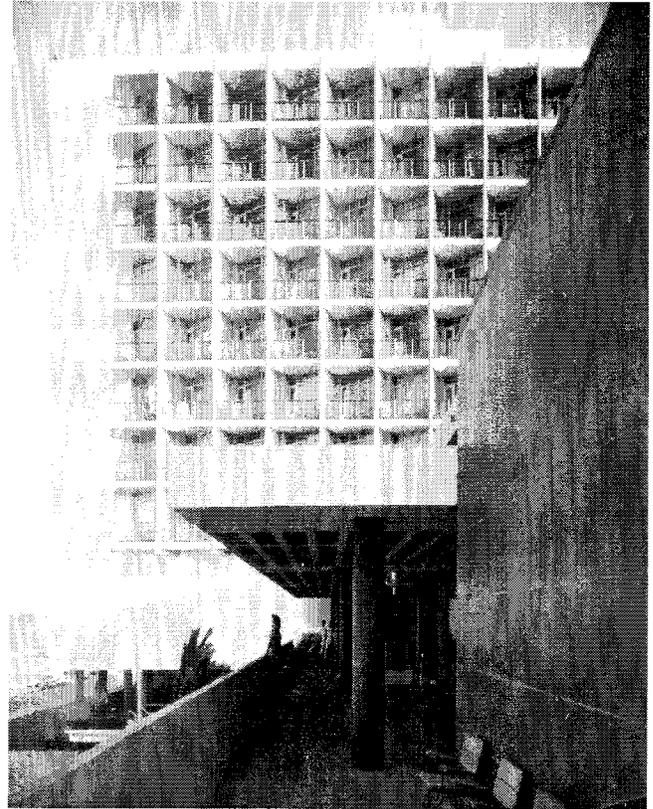


Figure 4. Entry, Caribe Hilton Hotel.

nately residential/commercial in use. This hotel was the third built in this area. As Condado is now one of the most important tourist zones in Puerto Rico, this hotel obviously represents a typology repeated during the following forty years and that now dominates the area. As a precedent, this hotel was one of the groundbreaking models of international tropical architecture. It followed the Hilton Hotel project, located in the same area, which was completed in 1949. Both hotels adopted the language of the modern movement, the international style of the post-WWII period, to create an expression appropriate to the tropical climate. Using the language of modernism, with its predominately straight, simple lines, that accentuated the functionality of the structure, it took advantage of climatological conditions, such as cross ventilation and natural illumination through the manipulation of screening, shading devices and brisolie. With open lobbies that accentuated the connection between inside and outside, it allowed for visual transparency and interaction with climate and nature. The goal was to define a truly tropical expression within the vocabulary of modern architecture. It followed the pattern of the Hilton Hotel in Puerto Rico, which served as the model for the development of a style of the Hilton chain called "Hilton International," repeated in hotels found in Tel-Aviv, Aruba, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, to name a few. The Puerto Rican Hilton was the first hotel built by the chain outside of the continental US.

The irony of the Hilton project, and by extension applicable to La Concha, is seen in the invited competition held for the project. Of the five invited firms, two were from Florida and

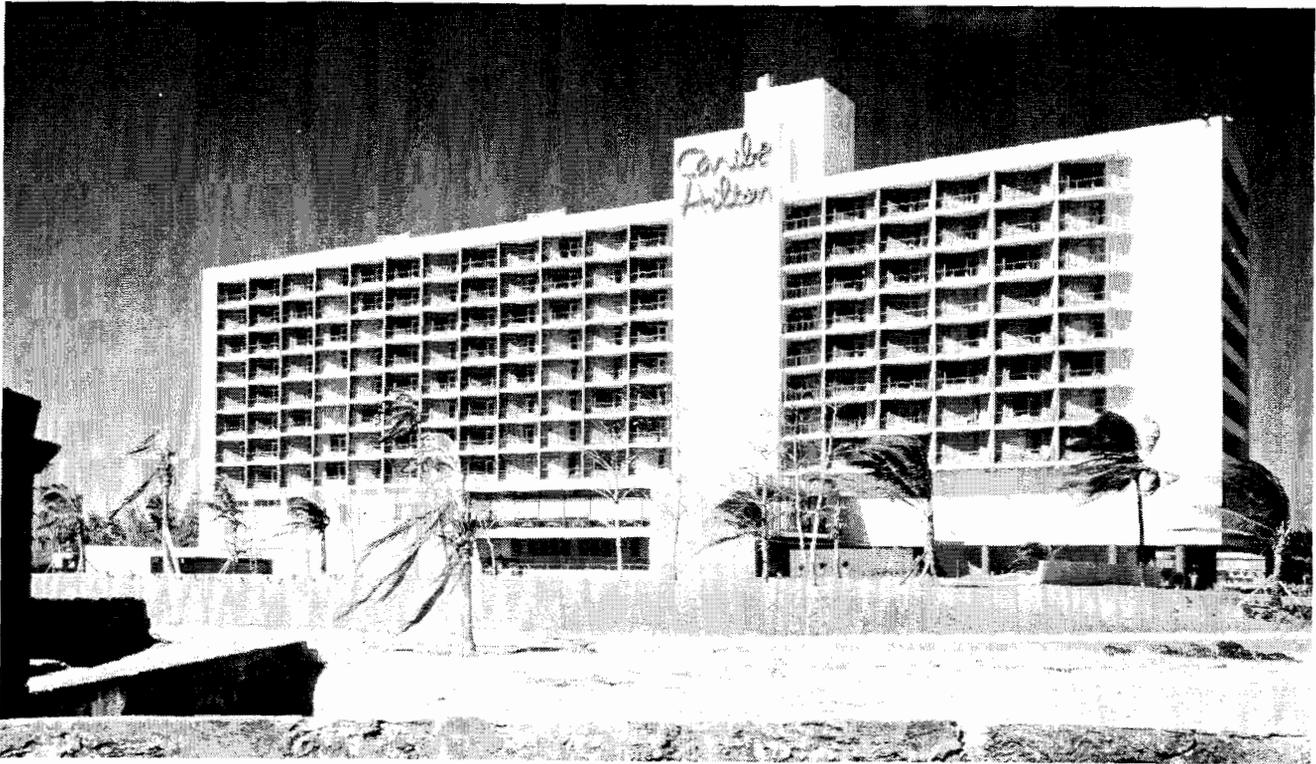


Figure 5. Caribe Hilton Hotel.

three from Puerto Rico. The two U.S. firms submitted designs in a Neo-Spanish style that evoked an idyllic and romantic vision of the Island. In contrast, the three Puerto Rican designs used the vocabulary of modernism.⁴

To speak of modernism and the “international style” as a monolithic force is obviously incorrect, even though Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, in the exhibition “International Style” of 1932, tried to group together architectural production with similar characteristics: buildings thought of in terms of “volume and not mass, an architecture where regularity prevailed over axial symmetry.”⁵ What is more appropriate is to speak about the language of modernism, and the use of a common vocabulary applied to local conditions.

The proponents of this architecture arrived in Puerto Rico in the form of the Austrian Richard Neutra and the German disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry Klumb. While Neutra remained but two years on the Island, Klumb stayed on until his tragic death many years later in an auto accident near his home in Río Piedras, adopting Puerto Rico as his homeland. If Klumb represented a “new” Puerto Rico, then the first indigenous exponents of this vision of modernism and progress were the local architects Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer, who utilized the vocabulary of the international style adapted to the tropical climate of the Island. Many of the strategies proposed by Klumb were appropriated and articulated by Toro and Ferrer, such as the particular characteristics of place — topography, orientation, climate, use of local materials, and an economy of means of construction — with the intention to represent an image of progress and industrialization rather than the painteresque normally associated with Puerto Rico.⁶

The work of Toro and Ferrer, especially in the case of the Hilton and La Concha, was the first by a local firm to launch Puerto Rican architecture into an international context. In his book *Arquitectura Contemporánea de Puerto Rico 1976-1992*, Andrés Mignucci refers to Toro and Ferrer as “promoters of the post-war architectural revolution” who “as in a large part of the world, evoked the spirit of the Modern Movement, presenting a vocabulary basically consistent in terms of its plasticity and formal posture.”⁷ La Concha received considerable international recognition, including making the cover of the prestigious architectural magazine, *Progressive Architecture*, in August 1959.

It also must be noted the influence of these two architects in the development of the next generation of practitioners in Puerto Rico, including Amaral and Morales, Horacio Díaz, Efraín Pérez Chánis, and the firm of Reed, Torres, Beauchamp and Marvel.

La Concha itself is basically a reinforced concrete skeleton structure. The “concha,” the night club of the complex with a shell shape, is a prime example of thin-shell concrete technology with a minimum thickness of 6 inches and a maximum of 8 inches at connection points. The structure was designed by Mario Salvatori, world recognized structural engineer. The construction of this innovative part of the complex was thoroughly covered in the March 26, 1959 issue of the noteworthy professional magazine, the *Engineering News-Record*.

This hotel came to represent the dramatic post-war changes taking place in Puerto Rico. Look Magazine recognized the importance of this building with its January 1961 issue dedicated to Puerto Rico, in which it displayed a large photo of the

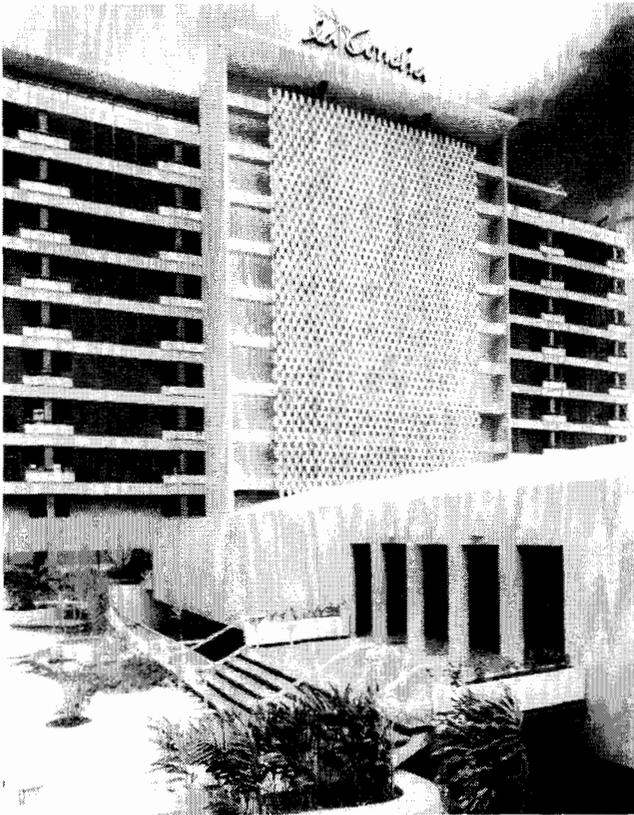


Figure 6. La Concha Hotel.

brisolie of the hotel, accompanied by the following text: "The handsome façade of San Juan's La Concha Hotel symbolizes the dramatic revolution that is bringing modernity to Puerto Rico."⁸

THE NEO-ARCHITECTURE OF COLONIALISM:

After the depression of the 1930s and the years surrounding WWII, there was a lack of investment in Puerto Rico. The government assumed the role of providing investment capital to develop industry and attract business to the Island. This included the hotel business, and in time, the government was a major investor in the tourism business. This state of affairs lasted almost fifty years. The government, during the administration of Hernández Colon, began to consider the possibility of divestment; however, it was not until 1993, under the current Roselló administration, that the process of privatization started. Of special concern were the hotels and convention center in Condado, including the Hotel La Concha, which the government asserted had losses of \$240 million since 1949.⁹

Two hotels—including La Concha and the Condado Beach Hotel—and the convention center in Condado were bundled together for sale as the "Condado Trio," and the buyer, identified in 1997, was the Development Management Group. Their proposal included the demolition not only of the Convention Center but also of La Concha itself. However, the sale of these properties for \$20 million has been enveloped in controversy. The first hitch came in April 1998 when the financial backer of the project, Atlantic Gulf Communities, withdrew its participation. Since that time DMG has not presented its financing structure to the Government Development Bank, although it has



Figure 7. La Concha Hotel.

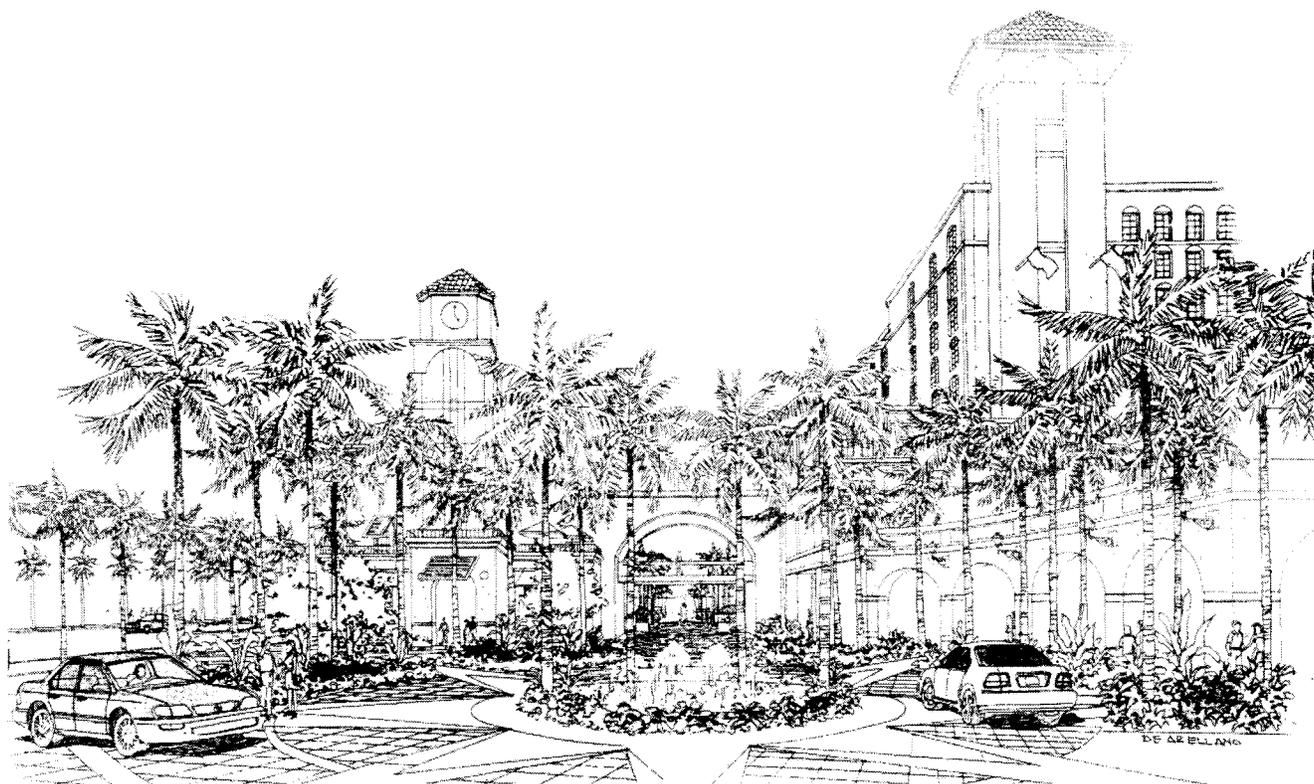


Figure 8. Condado Trio Proposal.

received several extensions of the original February 1998 deadline to do so. The government, meanwhile, has spent \$6 million on abatement cleanup to ready the existing buildings for demolition. The plans are to raze the Condado Convention Center and the Hotel La Concha, leaving only the Condado Beach Hotel to be transformed into a condominium building to be called the Vanderbilt. In place of the demolished structures, the project calls for building a tourist complex that would include a 400 room hotel, 100,000 square feet of retail space, a 50 room boutique hotel, as well as various plazas and parking facilities. The entire project is referred to as the Condado Beach Resort. The financing of the purchase of the hotel is being done with terms quite beneficial to the buyer. In reality DMG is putting up \$6 million in cash to be matched with \$14 from the government to buy the hotel. The company must find a total of \$82 million in equity and finance \$205 million in debt, of which \$177 million is being financed by the government itself. In reality, DMG is investing \$47 million in a project with a \$220 million price tag, the rest being supplied by the seller, the government itself.

In 1998, several forces combined to bring to a halt the process of the development of the project and the eventual destruction of La Concha. On one hand, the Colegio de Arquitectos, the association of architects in Puerto Rico, started the effort to have La Concha declared an historic monument. On the other, the Municipality of San Juan, one of three groups which originally attempted to purchase the Condado Trio, began a legal process which questioned the Environmental Impact Statement issued and the permitting process for construction. The Municipality

claims the project can be developed without the destruction of La Concha and has offered again to purchase the properties.

Complicating the Municipality's attempts to halt the demolition process and reopen the bidding for the project, is the fact that the Municipality is headed by Sila Calderón, who is also the leader of the Partido Popular Democrático, and candidate for the governorship. This party is the major opposition to the current party in power, the Partido Nuevo Progresista, which has promoted the privatization of the hotel and the Condado Beach Resort project. That the struggle has assumed political dimensions has made both sides more intransigent and the real facts of the case more difficult to perceive.

The Junta de Planificación rejected the request by the Colegio de Arquitectos to declare La Concha an historic building and the Colegio launched a legal appeal of this decision. In December of 1998, the Circuit Appeals Court rejected the appeal as being unfounded. By March, the Environmental Impact Statement was accepted and almost simultaneously the Colegio's further appeal to the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico was rejected. Meanwhile, the government decided to use \$3 million in public funds to speed up the process of demolition, even though it had publicly stated earlier that it would not use public funds for this purpose. In June 1999 the approval for demolition was given. Shortly thereafter, even though the demolition of the area by the pool had begun, the Supreme Court halted the project until the Appeals Court resolved the issue of the Environmental Impact Statement brought by the Municipality against the government. The project is currently stalled in court.

Not much has been revealed about the design of the proposed project of the Condado Beach Resort, except for a sketch published in 1997 in *El Vocero* and a two page ad published in the *San Juan Star* in June 1998, which included two perspective drawings in color of the proposal and a litany of reasons why it should be built. "Why is the project import?" asks the ad, and under the category "Careful Planning and Beautiful Architecture," is the given following reason: "Master planned as a single, architecturally integrated project, with all of the project elements reflecting Puerto Rico's Spanish heritage and a character reminiscent of Old San Juan."¹⁰ As used here, Old San Juan is a euphemism for the historic city center.

The two page spread lists the development team's professional consultants, which include the firm of Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo, cited as one of the "world's leading architectural firms," which has completed a number of major projects, including Disney's Grand Floridian Beach Resort. In conversation in San Juan with the President of the Colegio de Arquitectos during the controversy over the proposed design, the team leader from the architectural firm is purported to have admitted to never having been in Puerto Rico before. This is all too evident in the total lack of relationship between the proposed project and the historic city center, which it supposedly complements.

The situation regarding the demolition of the Hotel La Concha can only be described as ironic, in that a radically modern building is being torn down to be replaced by a revivalist structure, when the equally radical, modern hotel next door, the Hilton, was built fifty years ago instead of an alternative revivalist structure deemed not Puerto Rican enough.

CONCLUSION

International practice involves much more than adapting to local codes or superficially assimilating local architectural characteristics. This project is but one example of misreading the cultural implications of style and creating architecture based on unfounded assumptions. The irony is that an architecture, which to the uneducated eye appears to be a more authentic expression of Puerto Rican culture, turns out to be the architecture of colonialism, while the architecture which appears to be "foreign," is an authentic expression by local practitioners of an appropriate architecture that utilizes the vocabulary of modernism. The proposed Condado Beach project, in its use of a revival style which, rather than acknowledge a Spanish presence in Puerto Rico, is the resurgence of an invented style brought to the Island by the U.S. in its efforts at colonization some 100 years ago. Rather than honoring and reaffirming the Spanish tradition of Puerto Rico, it reaffirms the continued colonial status of the Island, a political condition totally rejected by the voters of in Puerto Rico during the last plebiscite on status only last year.

NOTES

¹ Enrique Vivoni, "The Architecture of Puerto Rican Identity," *Hispanofilia: Architecture and Life In Puerto Rico 1900-1950* (San Juan: UPR, 1998): 120.

² Ibid: 124.

³ Eliseo Colón Zayas, "'Spanishness' and Society in Puerto Rico," *Hispanofilia: Architecture And Life In Puerto Rico 1900-1950* (San Juan: UPR, 1998): 349.

⁴ Enrique Vivoni, "Palimpsesto Tropical," *Polifonía Salvaje* (San Juan: Editorial Postdata, 1995): 76. (Translation by the author)

⁵ Henry R. Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *International Style* (N.Y.: MOMA, 1932).

⁶ Andres Mignucci Giannoni, *Arquitectura Contemporánea En Puerto Rico 1976-1992* (San Juan: AIA, 1992):7. (Translation by the author); Enrique Vivoni, "Palimpsesto Tropical," *Polifonía Salvaje* (San Juan: Editorial Postdata, 1995): 77, (Translation by the author)

⁷ Andres Mignucci Giannoni, *Arquitectura Contemporánea En Puerto Rico 1976-1992* (San Juan: AIA, 1992):7. (Translation by the author)

⁸ *Look* (January 1961).

⁹ "Under New Management," *San Juan Star* (April 26, 1999).

¹⁰ "Condado Beach Resort," *San Juan Star* (June 22, 1998).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Diapoteca. Escuela de Arquitectura. Universidad de Puerto Rico.

Figure 2. Ibid.

Figure 3. Ibid.

Figure 4. Archivo de Arquitectura y Construcción, Universidad de Puerto Rico.

Figure 5. Ibid.

Figure 6. Ibid.

Figure 7. Ibid.

Figure 8. Zayas Torres, Edward, "El 2000 estará remozado Trio," *El Vocero*. (September 10, 1997).

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