

Tourism in San Juan, Puerto Rico and its Three Constructs: Island Past, Island Paradise and Island Progress

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Sometimes, it is difficult for Puerto Ricans to think of ourselves as residing on an island. Historically, we've always tended to look inland, towards the Cordillera Central. But I think that this turn of the head – headed by our vulnerability as an island – soon convinced us that we were capital letter LAND. We've eliminated the term "insular" as an adjective of our government and substituted it for "state". So, for me to construct an understanding of our architecture using the word "island" is a risk.

During the colonization of Puerto Rico by the United States, our finest asset – for them – was our island condition: key to the Caribbean. During the first fifty years of U.S. colonial process, our "islandness" gave way to various ways of seeing and being seen. *Island past*, played with the romantic notions of our Spanishness and the built bounties captured in the war; *Island paradise*, dealt with the exotic and luscious of our natural surroundings, quite frankly unexplored by most Puerto Ricans of the '20s and '30s and, finally *Island progress*, led by Puerto Rican hands, but wanting to demonstrate the goodness of American stewardship.

These three views of Puerto Rico had their impact on all of our architecture, and interestingly enough, they still do.

INTRODUCTION

With the destruction of the Puerta de Santiago in 1896, the ancient walled city of San Juan welcomed the rest of the Island. The demolition of the walls not only responded to the demands of a growing commercial sector for more space and an adequate access to the port, but also fed the desire of its residents to have access to modernity and progress. Three years before, in 1893, to celebrate the visit of Princess Eulalia, the city made an enormous effort to show off the progress attained in the colony:

it had installed electric street lamps, built a new square dedicated to the Admiral in front of the Municipal Theater and presented the Princess with the plans of a new sanitary sewer for the old city. That same year, Public Works had inaugurated a state-of-the-arts meteorological station, that would allow for precise weather forecast and thus aid the ships entering the harbor, and a set of plans were discussed for the urban growth of the city. The sprawl of the city, it seemed in mid-1890, was inevitable.

But the events in neighboring Cuba were to change all proposed, projected and desired changes to the city. If Spain was willing to invest in its last remaining colonies of its spent American empire, the United States would rush in with its new imperial role. Puerto Rico would become an important part of the American imperial archipelago that stretched from the Pacific to the Caribbean. In time, Puerto Rico's place would shift between three constructs: Island Past, Island Paradise and Island Progress. These three would serve as identity vehicles in general, and in particular for the Island's new role as a tourist destination. These constructs will affect the manner in which hotels were to be designed.

ISLAND PAST

The first and most persistent image that Americans had towards Puerto Rico was that of a hungry child in dire need of care. The cartoons published during the Spanish-American War insisted upon this image. War had liberated this child from the lion's claws and it was America's duty, well, destiny to feed and educate him. Spain in Puerto Rico had been uncivilized: had kept its charge ignorant, Catholic and without civility. Publications of the period, such as *Our Islands and Their People* and "Our Acquired Architecture" made of the imperial archipelago one body, with the same past and in need of the same remedies.

In his article for the *Architectural Record*, "Our Acquired Architecture," Montgomery Schuyler spoke of the Spanish homogeneity throughout the islands with one sweep of words: "The stucco walls and the tile roofs are the marks, wherever they are found, of the Spanish domination. And the uniformity of the treatment is as marked as in the Roman monuments erected in Roman colonies by Roman engineers."¹

This mentality of "homogeneity" allowed for continental civil servants to transit seamlessly between the islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean. The new colonization of the Pacific and the Caribbean fed the spirit of the American pioneers. News of the islands and their curiosities were further spread by the media and the innumerable photographs published at the turn-of-the-century. The most popular destiny was Manila, the most distant and exotic islands. The Bureau of Insular Affairs concurred, claiming that the Manila experience would forge good civil servants who would then be able to serve anywhere in the imperial archipelago. A case in point is George Colton, who was employed in Manila as a customs official. After several years in Manila, in 1909 he was designated governor of Puerto Rico. Colton was quick to imitate in his new venue his Manila experience where he had witnessed a building boom brought by the new city plan by Daniel Burnham. In his proposed plan, Burnham had preserved the old Spanish city and the fortified walls which he surrounded by parks and recreational areas.² In letters to the Secretary of War, Colton continually expressed his desire to do things "the way we did them in Manila."³

Soon after his appointment, Colton's pet project for San Juan was the construction of a grand hotel south of the fortification walls of Fort San Cristóbal. He convinced the Legislature to assign the sum of \$200,000.00 for its construction. The firm of Price and McLanahan, from Philadelphia, was hired to design the hotel in a narrow 4-acre lot in the San Juan Islet. The

reaction was mixed among the Puerto Ricans. The politicians complained, so much money for a hotel when the Capitol building project had been delayed for lack of funds, yet the socialite magazine *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, commended the project as one that would

Constitute a prodigious advance in favor of the improvement and progress of Puerto Rico, which with this project would place itself on the level of all great cities that shine for their magnificence and splendor.⁴

The design of the hotel plays upon the construct of *Island Past*. It evokes two Puerto Rican conditions: the island as a frontier, with all the Helen Jackson Hunt romantic notions a-la-Hollywood of a Spanish past; and the French Riviera-a-la-Florida tourist destiny with the recreation of San Agustín and the Flagler reminiscence of old Spain.

In the States, the California Mission Style had its heyday during the 1880s, but was stricken out of fashion at the Colombian Exposition when Daniel Burnham led his Eastern school of thought into victory with the design of the fair as the so-called "White city". But in the frontier, the style was heavily favored by the administration and other newly arrived American institutions. The Mission Style was preferred in the design of Protestant churches, a new institution in traditionally Catholic Puerto Rico; in buildings of United States corporations that had set up operations in the island; and in schools for the new public education system. For example, in 1907, Antonín Nechodoma, a Czech architect who arrived in Puerto Rico from Chicago, used this style in the design of the Methodist Church in Ponce and in the project in Fajardo for the YMCA. For a U.S. based sugar corporation, Nechodoma designed the residence of the administrator of the Central Fajardo as a Mission style bungalow. Nechodoma spoke of these designs in the Mission

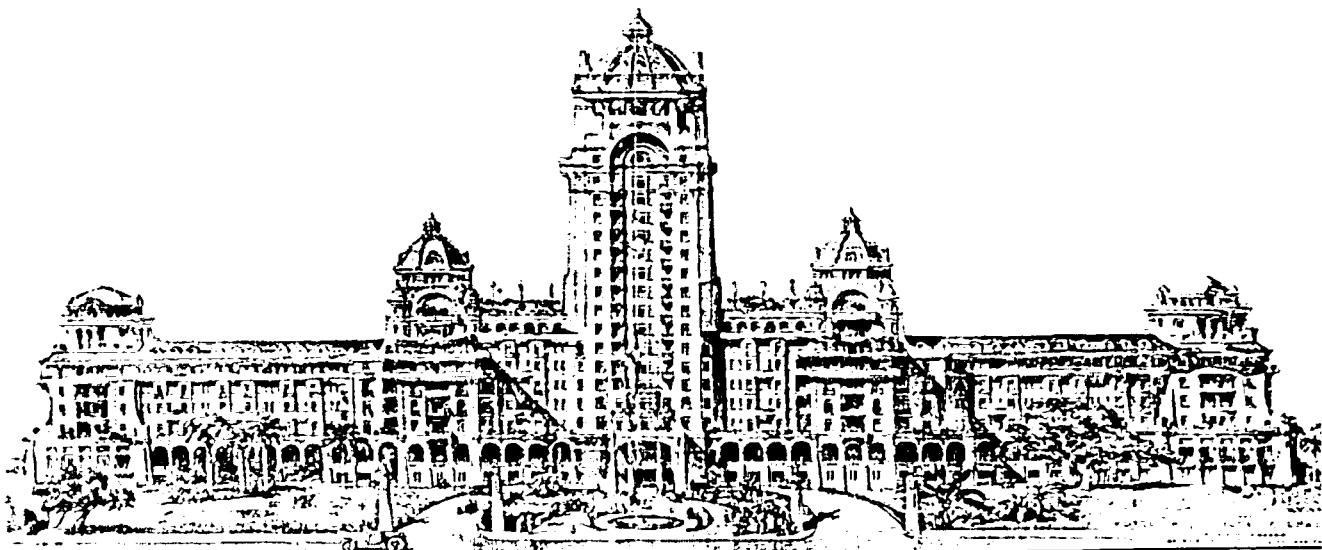


Fig. 1. Elevation of the Hotel San Cristóbal. Price & McLanahan, architects.

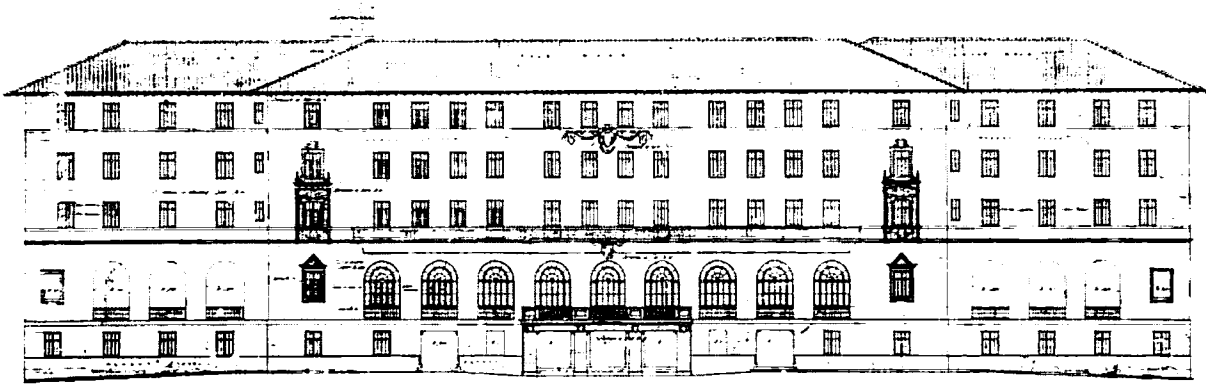


Fig. 2. Hotel Condado Vanderbilt, principal elevation. Warren and Wetmore Architects.

style as a "Spanish-American style" that "evolved from the rather primitive forms of the original quasi-Spanish buildings of this section [...]."⁵ Other American architectural firms also designed in the California Mission style in Puerto Rico. For example, Clarke, Howe and Homer of Rhode Island designed fourteen schools in 1908, among these, Public School Number One and the Model school for the University of Puerto Rico.

Governor Colton had set his sights in the development of San Juan, the capital city, as a radiant new city, with boulevards and a grand civic center. The San Cristobal Hotel would initiate this transformation. The old Spanish "carretera central" or main road that connected the old city with the rest of the island, would be transformed into the Ponce de León avenue. This new boulevard would mark the new entrance to the city and would be lined with the hotel and other civic institutions, such as Benjamin V. White's new YMCA building with its "exterior in an artistic Spanish style."⁶ Public School number one, the Capitol building and the Casino de Puerto Rico.

Colton's dream of a grand hotel never came to fruition. Local pressure from politicians and World War I would be responsible.

ISLAND PARADISE

The idea of making Puerto Rico a tourism destiny persisted even though existing commercial hotels were not up to American standards. Soon the Vanderbilts from New York proposed a new hotel outside the islet of San Juan, in the recently developed spit of land called El Condado. In 1914, they hired the firm of Warren and Wetmore, architects of the Biltmore, the New York Vanderbilt and the Grand Central Station for the design of the Condado Vanderbilt. Even though designed in the California Mission Style, the location of the

hotel spoke of another kind of tourism: exploiting the climate, the beaches and other out-doors activities. The site could not be better for this kind of tourism: on the north of this spit of land was the Atlantic Ocean and on the south, the Condado Lagoon. In the promotional brochure of the hotel, Puerto Rico was advertised as the "Switzerland of the Tropics" with its year-round weather ideal for the hotel's tennis courts, golf course, boating in the lagoon and horseback riding.⁷

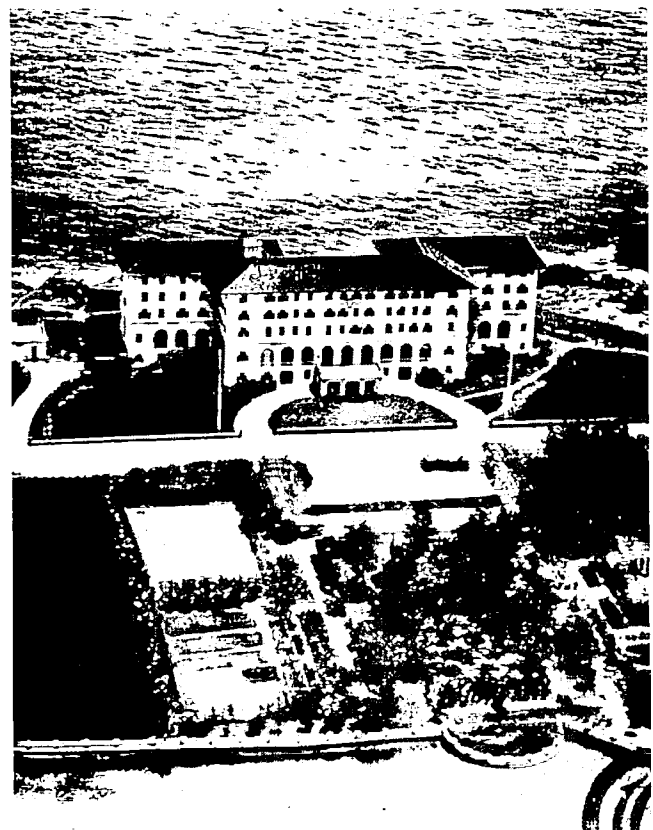


Fig. 3. Hotel Condado Vanderbilt, aerial view.

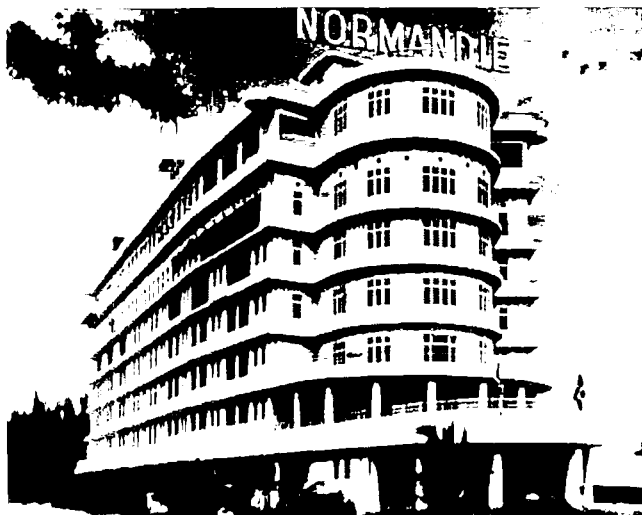


Fig. 4. Hotel Normandie. Raúl Reichard, architect.

The design of the hotel pulled in both sea-sides. On the north, the designers located loggias and opened the hotel's first floor to the ocean views, on the lagoon side, gardens, tennis courts and a wharf were located. The rooms of the hotel had views either of the ocean or of the lagoon. The hotel became the center of Puerto Rico's social life.

But one hotel was not enough to attract the all-American tourism and Miami was developing into a serious competition. South Beach's Art Deco style had become an icon of tourism and soon it would also impact the Island. In 1937, the *Miami* building was inaugurated in El Condado, and many other Art Deco buildings were to become part of San Juan's growing suburbs. In 1938, Félix Rexach, owner of the Escambrón Beach Club, the most popular restaurant-club in San Juan, decided to



Fig. 5. Hotel Normandie. Golden Room.

build a hotel next to his club. He wanted a hotel with a French twist, comparable to the luxuries he had experienced in his travels with his French wife aboard the *Normandie*. For the design, he chose Raúl Reichard and soon the drawings for the Normandie Hotel were completed. The site had views of the Atlantic Ocean, the Condado Lagoon and the Muñoz Rivera Park. The Art Deco hotel had an interior atrium that culminated with a skylight and at lobby level, a swimming pool and on the sixth floor, the hotel's club, restaurant and bars. The almost stark exterior design of the hotel (except for its curves, porthole and enormous billboard sign) contrasted with the lavish interiors where rooms were designed to imitate *boudoirs*. Luxury and lust were intrinsic to this hotel that evoked still another aspect of the *Island Paradise* construct: that of gambling, easy nights and sex...

The Second World War would modify this image.

ISLAND PROGRESS

The militarization and industrialization of Puerto Rico prompted the third construct: *Island Progress*. During the years of World War II and the governorship of Rexford G. Tugwell, architecture in Puerto Rico assumed a decisive modernizing roll. Public works, as they had in previous administrations, no longer represented a past, cultural heritage or traditions, but rather represented the image of a healthy, educated, modern and progressive people. The new architecture promoted by Tugwell's governorship pretended to cure all social evils, and as he would say, a good building would make its inhabitant a healthy and happy human being.

In order to achieve this in the shortest and surest way, in 1943, Tugwell created the Public Works Design Committee. He invited proven Modern Movement architects to participate under the tutorship of Richard Neutra. In charge of the office in Puerto Rico he hired German architect and Taliesin Fellow, Henry Klumb. Young Puerto Rican architects were hired to work in this Committee and the impact of the Modern Movement was felt throughout the profession. Neutra would say: "It can be said that from this Committee a new architecture for Puerto Rico was created. It was a new school for training young architects."⁹

Out of this school came two architects, Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer who, in 1945, established their architectural firm. Their largest commission came after winning the state-sponsored competition for a 300-bed hotel. This design competition was organized by the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company. It invited five architectural firms to participate: three locals and two Florida-based. The state-side offices of Frederick Seelman and Robert Swartburg, were suggested by Conrad Hilton, who was to administrate the hotel. The three local firms

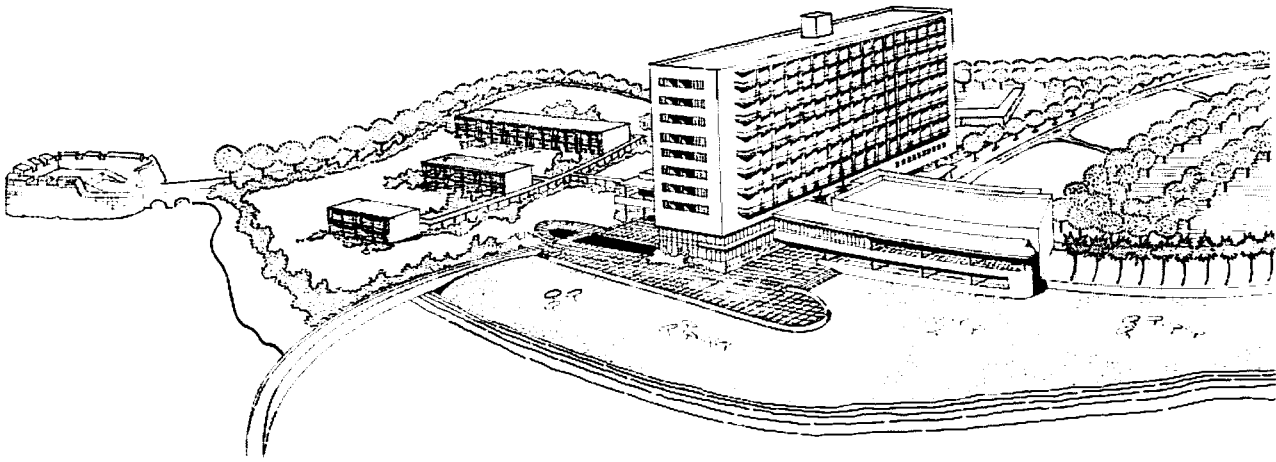


Fig. 6. Hotel Caribbean Hilton..perspective of the winning project. Toro Ferrer and Torregrosa, architects.

were new: The Office of Henry Klumb, Toro Ferrer and Torregrosa, and Schimmelpfennig, Ruiz and González. All were previous Design Committee employees. The two American submittals were hotels designed in the Spanish Renaissance, while the three submissions from Puerto Rico were thoroughly Modern Movement designs.

The Caribe Hilton Hotel was the first mayor Modern Movement building to be erected in Puerto Rico. Some architects protested its straight, engineer-like lines, newspapers compared it to a Coca-Cola bottle box on its side, a white elephant, or a folly. But the ten-story building was to become an icon. Its design

incorporated all of Le Corbusier's five points: it was raised on pilotis which allowed for an uninterrupted view of the ocean once you arrived at the lobby; its floor plan was free of supporting walls; the served and servant spaces were clearly delineated; the brise-soleils not only protected the air-conditioned rooms, but were the rooms' balconies; and the roof garden allowed for private sun-bathing and massage. When it was finally inaugurated in 1949, three years after the competition, it was considered in architectural journals as the "most monumental work done by Puerto Rican architects." The architectural formula, which emphasized the "modern, more than the romantic"⁹ of Puerto Rico had been achieved.

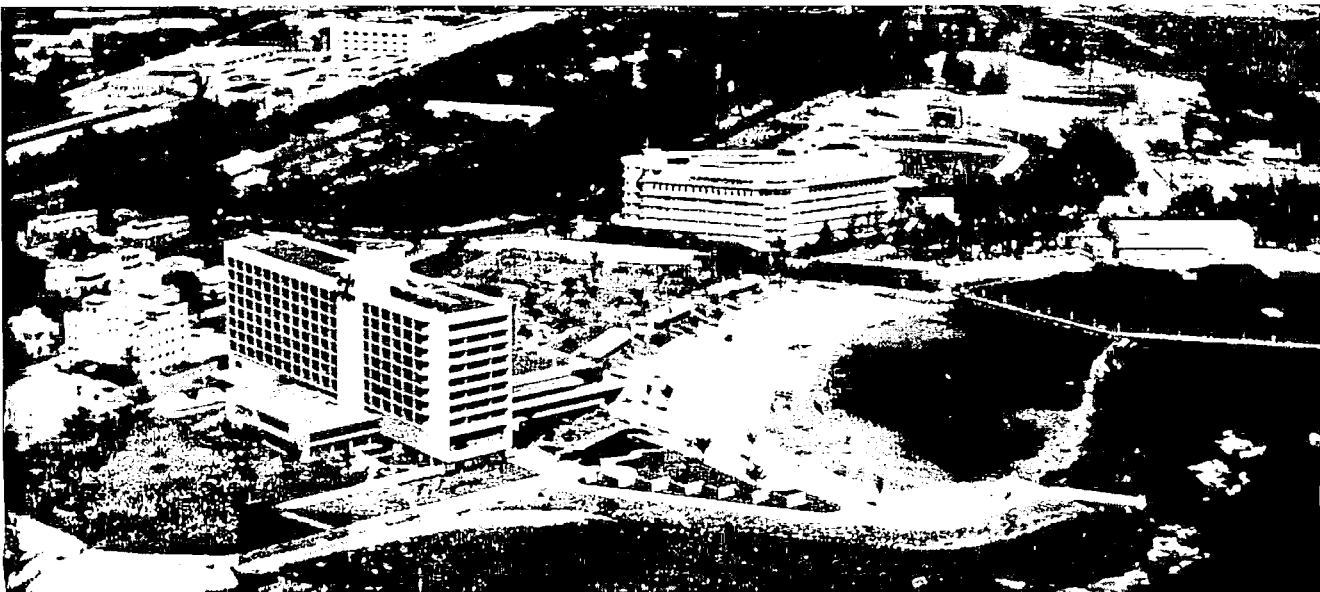


Fig. 7. Aerial view of the hotels Caribbean Hilton and Normandie.



Fig. 3. View of the Hotel Caribbean Hilton from the ancient Fort San Gerónimo.

CONCLUSION

Island Past, Island Paradise and Island Progress were, and still are, three constructs that delineate the changing Puerto Rican

identity. In some instances, the construct was imposed from the outside, in other, Puerto Ricans initiated a new identity. In all cases, architecture served as its most visual and permanent vehicle.

¹Montgomery Schuyler, "Our Acquired Architecture," *Architectural Record* (January 1900): 290-291.

²William E. Parsons, "Burnham as a Pioneer in City Planning," *Architectural Record* (April 1915): 24.

³National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 350; Series: Carnivals, expositions; Folder 20546; Box 849; George Colton letter to General Edwards (January 12, 1910).

⁴"Grandioso hotel en Puerto Rico, un ideal concebido y patrocinado por el Honorable Gobernador Colton, será pronto un hecho," *Puerto Rico Ilustrado* (October 6, 1910): 8-9.

⁵Antoniú Nechodoma, "Architecture and Architects in Porto Rico," *El Libro Azul de Porto Rico* (San Juan: The Blue Book Publishing Co., 1923) 793.

⁶*The West India YMCA* 1.1 (January, 1910)

⁷Porto Rico, "The Switzerland of the Tropics" (San Juan: The Condado Vanderbilt Hotel, [1920]).

⁸"Puerto Rico," *The Architectural Forum* (March 1915): 119-130.

⁹David F. Ross, *The Long Uphill Path (A Historical Study of Puerto Rico's Progress of Economic Development)* (San Juan: Talleres Gráficos Interamericanos, 1966) 103-101.