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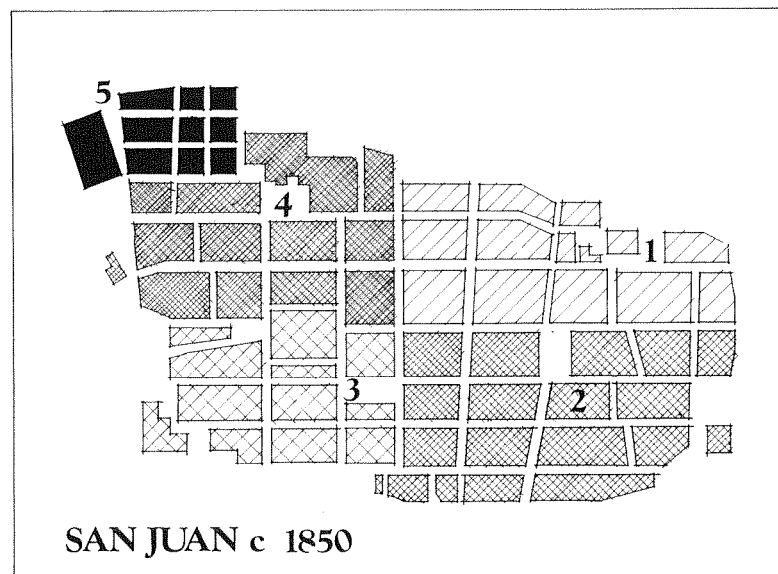
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Reclaiming Ballajá

Andrés Mignucci Giannoni

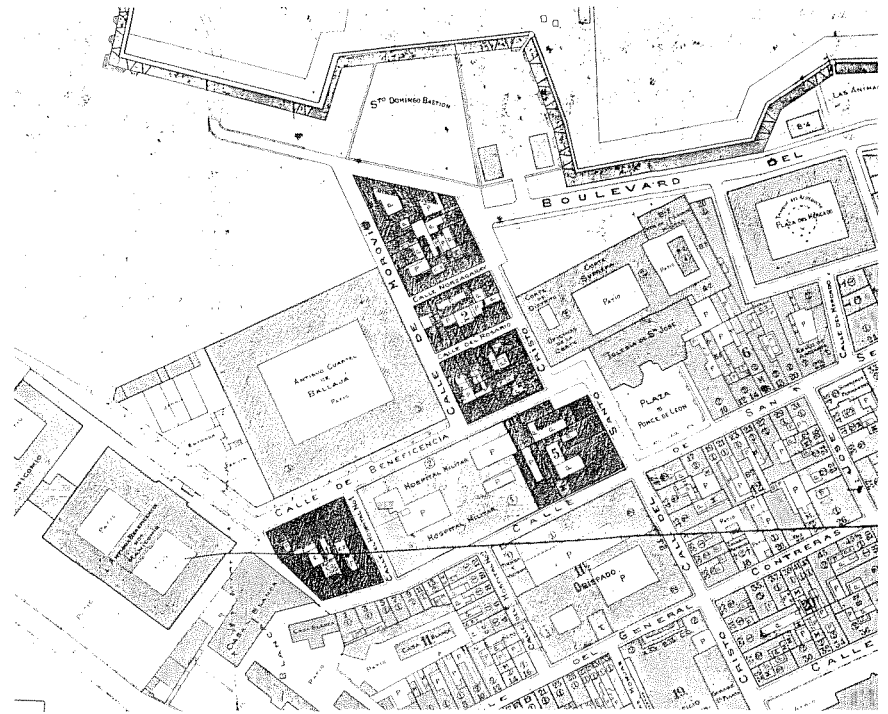
With the restoration of the waterfront well under way, the Ballajá Quarter of San Juan, Puerto Rico, stands as the last large area still to be reintegrated into the historic fabric of the old city. After suffering from years of neglect and deterioration, the area has recently been targeted for redevelopment and controversy has developed around the strategies and models for its reconstruction. As defined by the government authorities, the program for the area calls for, first, the restoration and adaptive reuse of the existing monumental buildings and, second, the development on vacant lots of a five-story underground parking structure with a three-block plaza on top to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America. Contracts have already been awarded and work is under way on the design of these projects. However, the general urban design intentions for the area and the programmatic nature of its reconstruction have been developed in the absence of a clear and defined comprehensive master plan.

The study presented in this paper outlines a strategy for the reconstruction of the Ballajá Quarter as an active, living part of the city of San Juan. Its premises are illustrated through a design which reflects a vision for the area and for its connection to the rest of the city. The reconstruction of a portion of a city, especially a historically sensitive one, requires a clear understanding of two important aspects of the work: first, the political stance, which forms the primary attitudinal framework

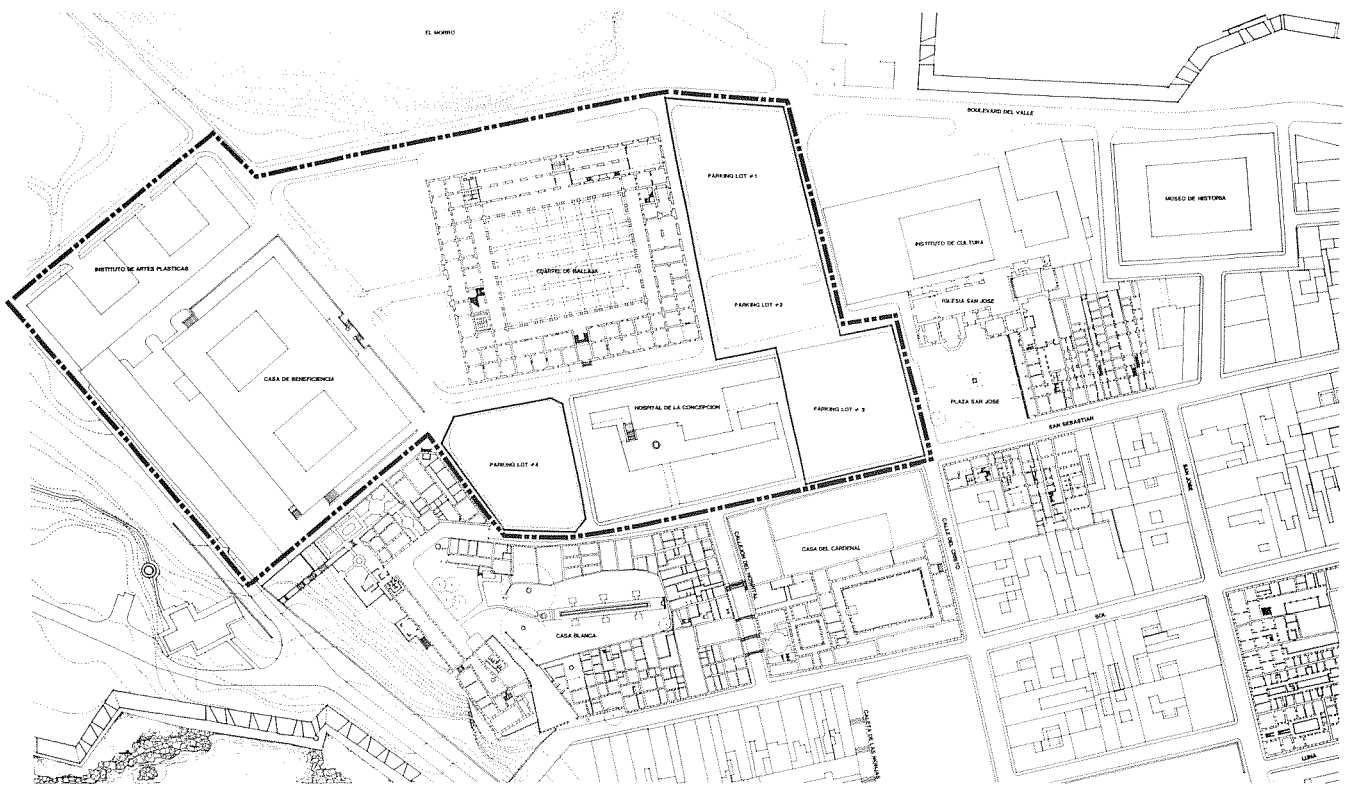


1 Ballajá Quarter, aerial photograph

2 San Juan, ca. 1850, showing the five urban quarters of the city: 1, Santa Barbara; 2, San Francisco; 3, San Juan; 4, Santo Domingo; 5, Ballajá.



3



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3 Ballajá and Santo Domingo Quarters, 1921, showing the old residential buildings before demolition

4 Ballajá, 1986, existing context plan showing the relation of the Quarter to the city fabric, the vast parking lots, and the large institutional buildings

5 Parking Lot on the site of the old residential buildings. San José Church is on the right and the Institute of Culture is in the background.

6 Existing Context of the Ballajá Quarter, aerial photograph

of values from which the basic physical and programmatic decisions and priorities will be based; and second, and equally important, the methodological stance, which provides the strategic and mechanical means through which the first will be carried out. Hopefully, the positions outlined on these two grounds will contribute toward building a comprehensive image of the issues involved and point toward some possibilities for the sensitive restructuring of the area.

Development and Present State of the Quarter

The Ballajá Quarter sits on the highest point of the islet of San Juan, perched on a ridge from which one can see the ocean to the north and south. The Quarter covers approximately three acres comprising six large city blocks. Because of its key location, the Quarter serves as a gateway to the city when approached from the peripheral circuit of Boulevard del Valle. Further, it also serves as the physical link between the city and El Morro, a monumental defensive fortress whose grounds are now a large public park.

The Quarter is connected to the rest of the city primarily by Cristo and San Sebastián streets and by a series of stepped pedestrian streets formed by the Caleta de las Monjas and the Callejón del Hospital. The pedestrian streets are much narrower and quieter than those carrying automobiles and provide both a cooler and more tranquil alternative to the busy commercial Cristo Street.



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Taking its present form in the 1850s, the area was the fifth and last of the urban quarters to be developed *intramuros*, within the city walls. From its beginnings it took on the character of an institutional district, with its buildings primarily dedicated to civic and military uses. The Hospital de la Concepción (1779), Casa de Beneficiencia—the hospice (1844), the Cuartel de Ballajá (1857), and the insane asylum (1868) form a complex of grand monumental buildings. The largest of these is the Cuartel de Ballajá, which previously housed the Spanish and later the American army. Taming the scale of these grand structures were four blocks of low residential buildings, which provided a balance of both form and use within the Quarter and integrated it with the rest of the city.

After the war of 1898, the United States Army occupied Puerto Rico and established El Morro and Ballajá as its center of operations. It renamed the area Fort Brooke. In the mid-1940s the Army tore down the residential blocks to construct a parking lot for military vehicles. A large urban vacuum was created, Plaza San José lost its definition and sense of containment, and once the military left the area, the large structures, isolated and obsolete in their uses, fell progressively into disrepair and deterioration. A whole sector of the city disappeared. Some of the larger buildings were restored in the 1970s: the insane asylum became the Instituto de Artes Plásticas, and the old military hospital (Hospital de la Concepción) was occupied by the Department of Education. But the Cuartel de Ballajá and the Casa de Beneficiencia remain abandoned,

7 San José Church and Plaza

8 Pedestrian Street, Callejón del Hospital

9 San Sebastián Street Block, illustrating the typical building type

and the sites of the old residential blocks are still being used for parking.

The Structure of Old San Juan

The platform of this study is that it is necessary to rebuild and restructure the urban fabric of the Quarter in such a way that it responds to the nature of the existing physical and social environment. An architectural intervention should be an extension of its context and an expression of the physical and associative content of its place. This cannot be accomplished by mimicking or copying its outer semblance but through a thorough understanding of the principles operating in a place. This suggests that architecture, as part of a physical context, constitutes a language. In it one can identify elements or components of the language as well as a syntax, the system of rules that regulates the relationships between the elements.

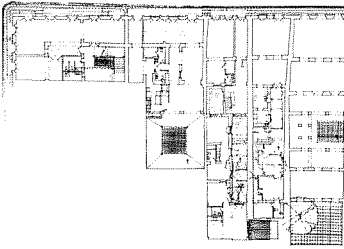
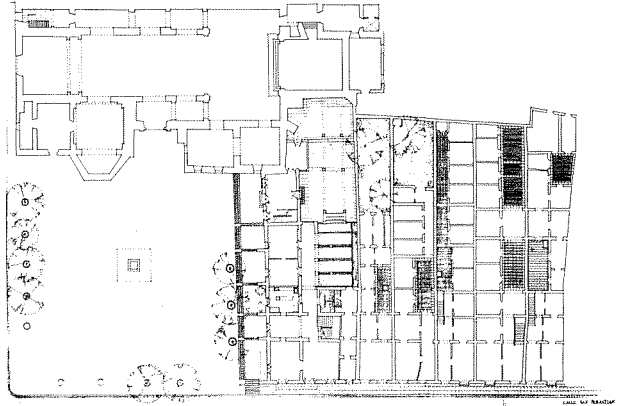
The structure of San Juan developed as a result of two types of systems. First, there was an implicit system, a whole set of “collective agreements” shared by the Spanish settlers, what Ortega called the “binding observances” of a culture. This system tempered the way they behaved and socialized individually and as a group. As part of this system, they brought the associations of their motherland, their towns, the forms and materials of their houses, the colors of their walls, the smells of their city, the gatherings in their plazas,



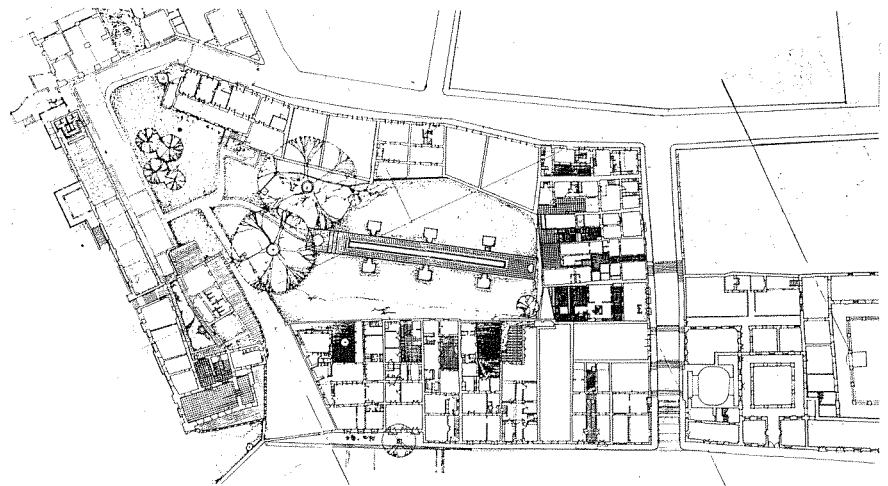
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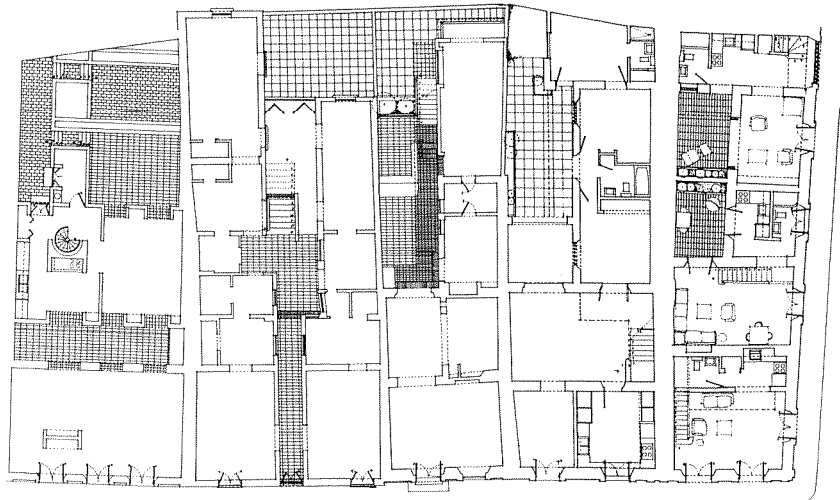
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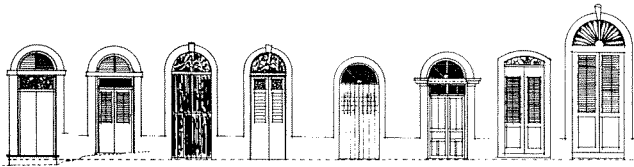


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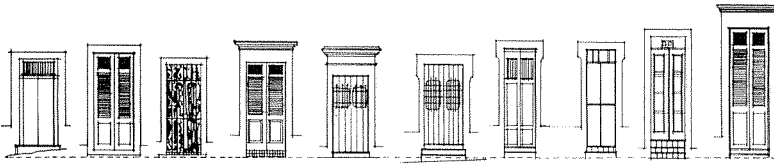
- 10 Observation #1: Plaza**, showing the buildings around the public square, Plaza San José
- 11 Observation #2: Street**, Plan of the buildings along a pedestrian street, Callejón del Hospital. Casa Blanca is to the left and San Sebastián Street is at the top.
- 12 Observation #3: Block Unit**, detail of the plan in observation #2 showing the aggregation of the units and the elements of the San Juan house



13



① DOORS:
ARCHED



② W. LINTEL

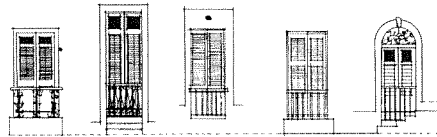


④ WINDOWS
⑤ W. OJO DE BUEY

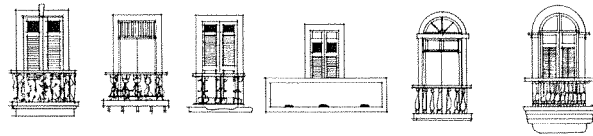
DOOR.....Ⓐ
WINDOW.....Ⓑ

ELEMENTS

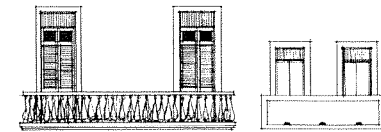
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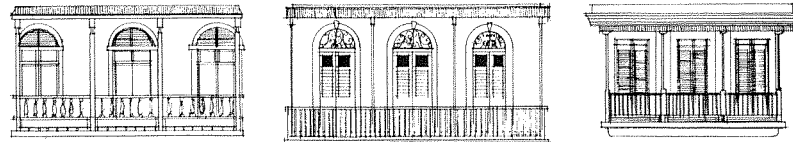
SINGLE
(ON GROUND)



SINGLE



EXTENDED



COVERED

FRENCH WINDOW.....Ⓐ
BALCONY.....Ⓑ

SUB-SYSTEMS

15

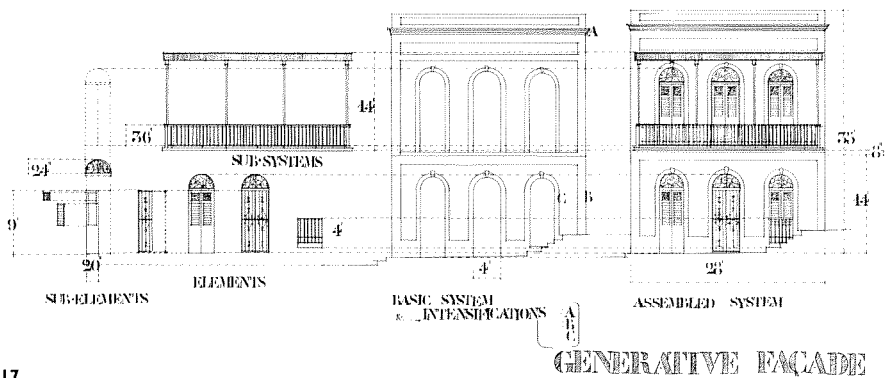
13 San Sebastián Street, elevation

14 Facade Elements

15 Facade subsystems



16



17

16 Facade system

17 Generative Facade, showing the elements and subsystems as they aggregate into the larger facade system

18 Entry study, showing the position and uses of the front zone of the San Juan house

19 Levels of permanency and change.

The top drawing shows the progressive inhabitation of the unit, from the most permanent, least tractable elements, the basic structure, to the least permanent, the furniture. The bottom drawing shows how the basic unit has been subdivided to accommodate three apartments

20 Patio study, showing the formal range of positions and directions of the interior patios

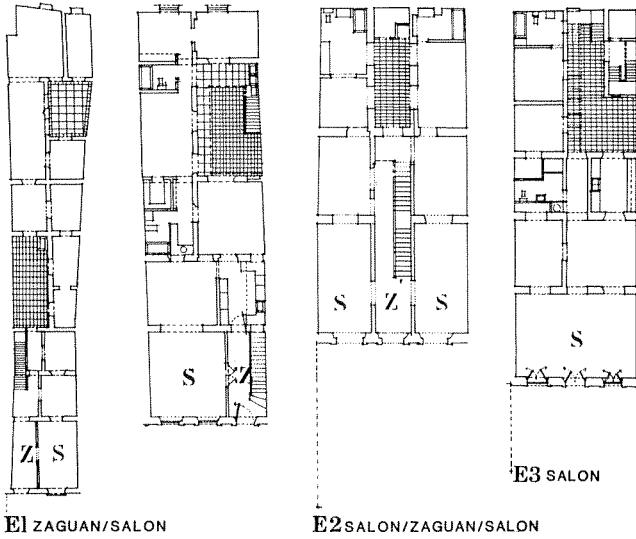
and the whole set of qualities that made their place theirs. They brought their way of seeing.

Superimposed on this system was one of a different sort, still with elements and components and a syntax to govern them but one handed down by the State, the Spanish crown. This explicit system, the Laws of the Indies, regulated the layout and development of the new settlements in the Spanish colonies. It identified its three main urban elements, the building block, street, and plaza, and outlined, in very clear terms, the rules for their position, direction, and dimensions as they were to be deployed in the landscape.

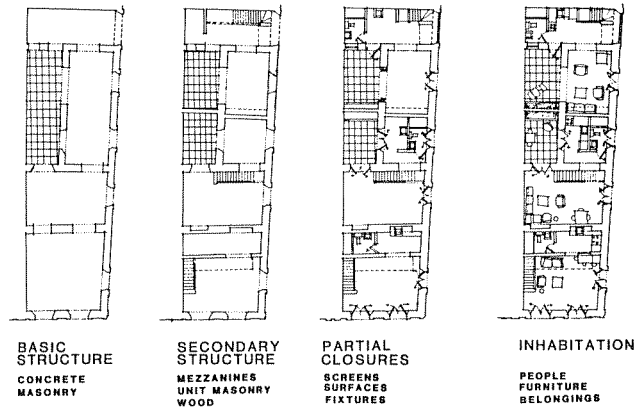
The combination of the implicit and explicit systems made the urban structure and the character of San Juan as a place cohere. They articulated common laws of structure and growth that established visual, physical, and social affinities within the city. The city's outer forms are never the same—each unit is slightly different from the next—yet each holds the same principles in common. The resulting theme and variations keep the balance between the larger collective understanding of the place and the individual's identification with its components.

The Methodology for the Reconstruction of the Quarter

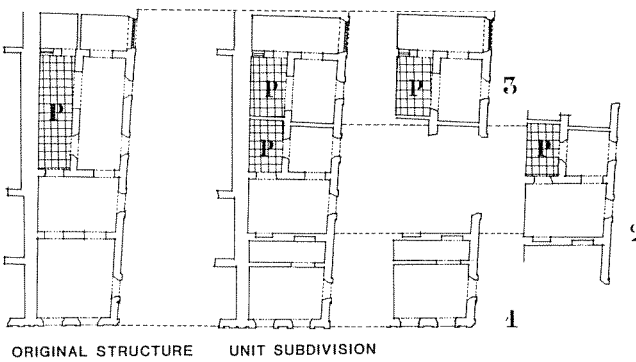
In being sensitive to the nature of the place, the model for the reconstruction of the Ballajá Quarter should come directly from



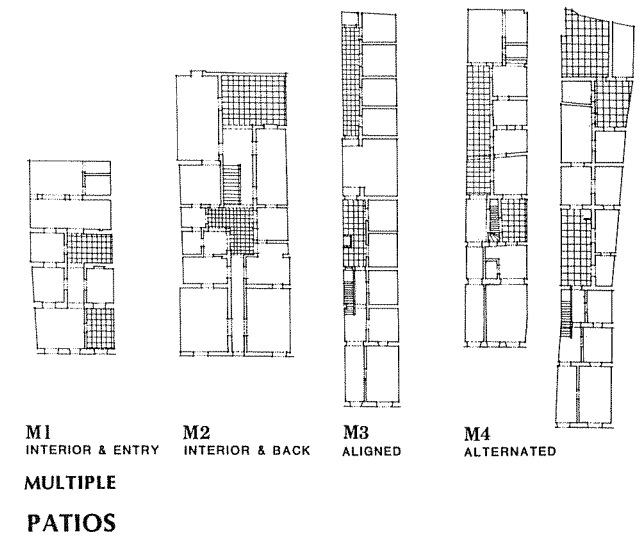
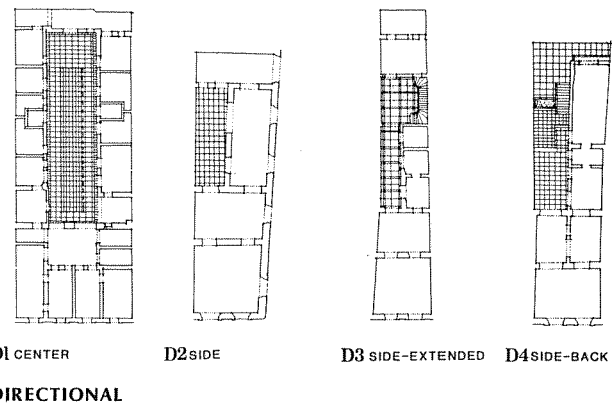
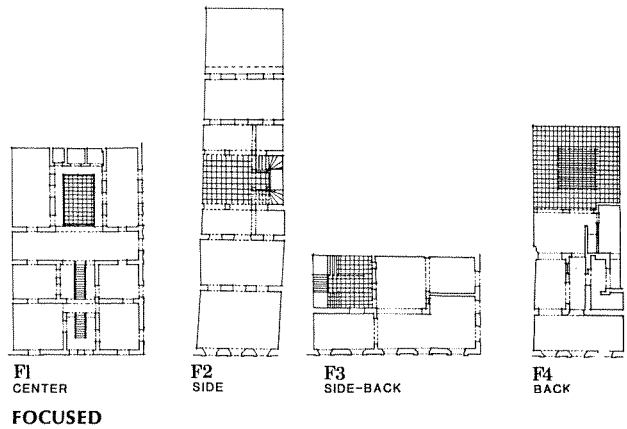
ENTRY
18



LEVELS OF PERMANENCY



CHANGE
19



the structure and identity of San Juan as a city. Three studies underpin the design for the Quarter and provide a framework from which to project the new design as an extension of the principles present in the city. The first involves measured, systematic observations and recordings of four different areas in, or adjacent to, the Ballajá Quarter: Plaza San José, San Sebastián and Sol streets, Callejón del Hospital, and the block bounded by Luna, Cruz, Sol, and San José streets. These observations are directed toward bringing out the “structure” of the basic components of the city and the basic San Juan building type as it changes with different conditions of topography, use, access, form definition and containment, and location within the city fabric.

The second study examines the forces acting on the Quarter and its relationship with the rest of the city’s structure. From it a set of urban design intentions is generated.

The third study analyzes the observations and the general urban design intentions and develops from them a set of new elements to be deployed and used in reconstructing the Quarter. These elements form the vocabulary for the design.

Observations: Looking at the City

The urban structure of San Juan, its growth and form, developed as a response to a number of forces. Constrained physically by its location on an islet and constrained further by being a walled city, the

city did not expand gradually and parallel to its growth in population. Instead a dense environment was generated, which is complex and rich in its multiplicity of functions yet manageable in size and scale.

The narrow main streets provide the general framework for movement within the city fabric. The even narrower secondary streets were originally formed by the spaces between the houses, fulfilling the sole function of providing access to the units. These streets were later paved and integrated with the city structure. Their narrow width coupled with the heights of the buildings provide much needed shelter from the fierce tropical sun.

Another response to both density and climate was the construction of inward-looking dwellings with interior patios. These were already part of the settlers’ implicit system, since most of them came from Andalusia, which inherited the patios from the Moors. The interior patios insure the privacy of the family, while the balconies in the facades provide the connection to the life that takes place outside.

The public plazas are the most important element of the urban system. They are the setting where the city’s most important social, commercial, and cultural activities take place. The plazas are both a gathering place and an orientation landmark within the fabric.

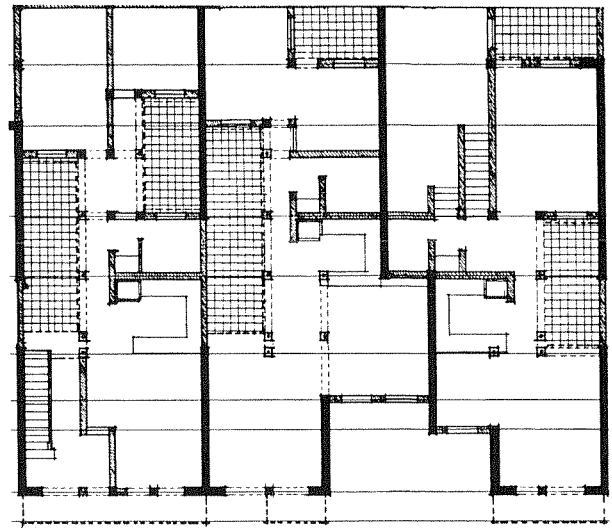
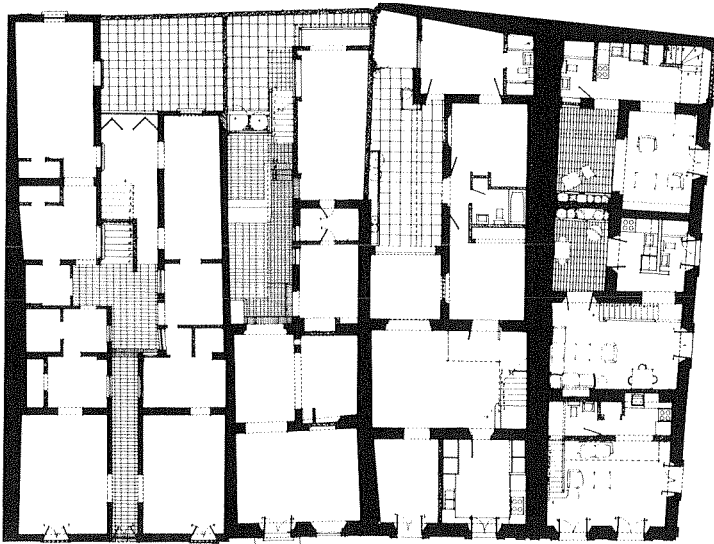
The public plazas and the private patios together are the lungs of the city. Their trees allow the city to

breathe. A beautiful stability exists between these two elements, since the patio is really a plaza at the level of the house and the plaza is a patio at the level of the city.

San Juan is then an assemblage of public elements—the plazas, streets, and public buildings—and private elements—the urban blocks and individual buildings and units.

The houses in San Juan also possess both public and private elements. The patio, salon, kitchen, and work areas constitute the collective, public quarters, and the sleeping chambers and bathrooms make up the private areas. Another area that plays a crucial role in the house is the *zaguán*, a narrow passageway that leads from the street to the entry of the house. The opening provides an instant glance at the activity taking place in the patio. It is also fundamental in ventilating the space within, which would otherwise be a trough of stagnant air. If a house has different tenants on each floor the stairs are usually located in the *zaguán*. When the dwelling is occupied by one family, the stairs are usually located in the patio or in the middle zone of the house.

The elements of the facades are also extremely important in shaping the identity of San Juan. The balconies, projecting beyond the face of the building, are extensions of the interior realm of the house into the exterior realm of the city. Entering-leaving, inside-outside, individual-collective, public-private are all associations embodied within the facade. The face of the building is



EXISTING STRUCTURE

21

then not a plane but a zone, a collection of spatially defined territories that articulate the threshold between inside and outside. The projecting balconies, the arcades, and the *zaguán* form part of this vocabulary. Common to all these elements is the dual role of delineating what is public and what is private and taming as much as possible the tropical climate. Elements such as the *medios puntos* (arched cast iron transoms placed above doors and openings), the *ojos de buey* (small circular openings on the facade), and the ever present cast iron grills and gates are all specifically designed to facilitate the ventilation of the units while insuring protection.

From recording and analyzing these areas, groups of elements and relationships emerge. These serve as a basis for establishing a vocabulary for the Ballajá Quarter, one with a syntax and identity of its own but one that remains continuous with the language of the city.

Continuity of Ballajá with the City

A number of issues are apparent when observations are made about the relationship of Ballajá to San

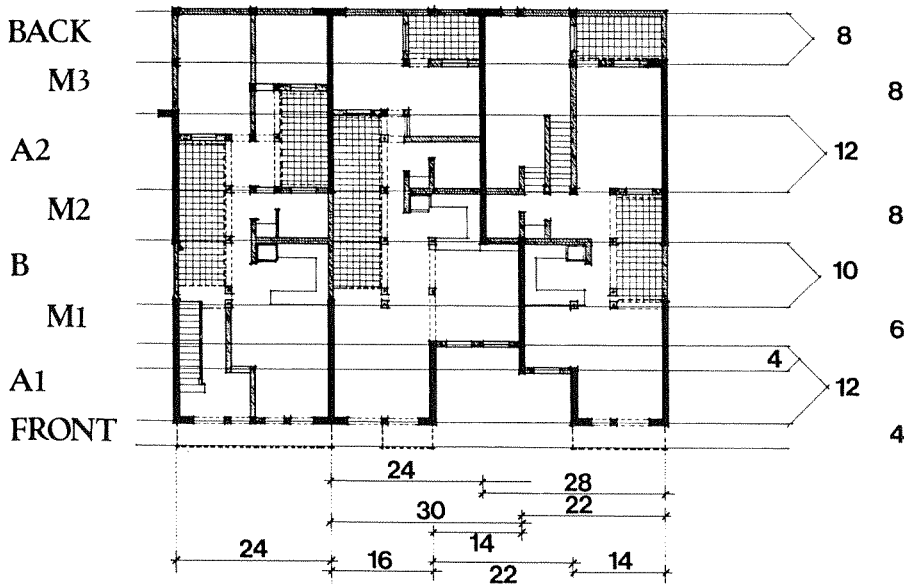
PROJECTED STRUCTURE

22

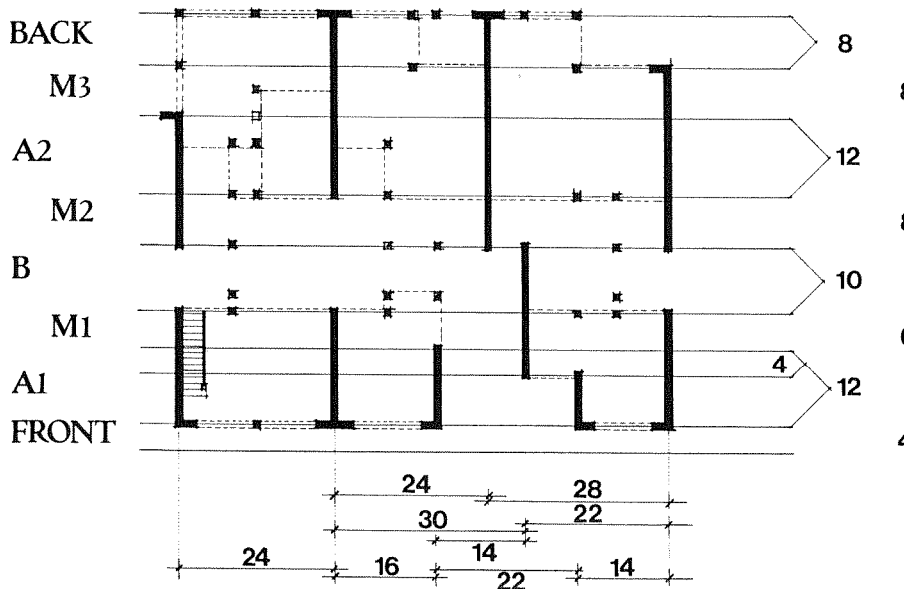
Juan proper. First, a look at the position of Ballajá within the city immediately makes clear the importance and significance of its location. By taking advantage of its proximity to El Morro and its park, to the Plaza San José, to the Institute of Culture and other monumental buildings, and its position as a gateway to Cristo Street from the north, the severed relationship between these urban components could be mended.

A crucial part of this urban design strategy is to reintroduce the scale of the residential blocks destroyed in the 1940s. This accomplishes two important goals. First, it creates a new balance between the projected institutional and governmental uses for the large buildings and the residential units, commercial and office spaces, and other small-scale supporting uses. This will bring a renewed activity and vitality to the area. Second, it regains the physical definition and containment that was lost when the buildings were torn down. The issue of containment is particularly critical for that portion of the vacant lots fronting Plaza San José. The proposed three-block urban plaza is not an appropriate alternative for such a large site. The

21, 22 Existing and projected structure.
These drawings compare the existing building fabric with the new projected building units



23



24

23 **Support system**, the basic structure of the building units, showing the margins for the position of elements and spaces and their dimensions

24 **Inhabited support system**

25 **Site plan** of the design for the vacant lots

present spatial vacuum will continue to exist as long as the lots are still used as open space. Rather, a smaller plaza, one comparable in size to those already existing in the city, would be appropriate, particularly at the meeting point of Boulevard del Valle, the entrance gate to El Morro, and the entrance to the city at Cristo Street.

Parking for both residents and visitors is a serious problem within the old city, and traffic congestion, with all its detrimental side effects (pollution, noise, heat), is becoming worse each day. A possible solution might include the design of a parking structure beneath the plaza of the Cuartel de Ballajá building, the largest single space in the city. This project could be integrated into the planned restoration of the building. A study of the parking facility under Madrid's Plaza Mayor, already in use, could be useful as a precedent for Ballajá.

With these general issues in mind, the following urban design intentions were delineated for the reconstruction of the Quarter:

Extend the north-south pedestrian network defined by the Callejón del Hospital and the Caleta de las Monjas to link the core of the city with the public grounds of the El Morro fortress.

Design a new plaza at the intersection of the Boulevard del Valle and Cristo Street to function as a gateway to the city as well as to the park.

Design a parking structure beneath the existing vacant lots

on Cristo Street or the large interior patio of the Cuartel de Ballajá building.

Design two new city blocks on the vacant lots along Cristo Street in order to mend the city fabric. These new blocks would be primarily residential, with their ground floor devoted to commercial or office use on those buildings fronting the new plaza. Build one of these blocks, located on the west edge of Plaza San José, so as to eliminate the urban vacuum created by the existing empty lots and restore the plaza to its proper degree of definition and containment.

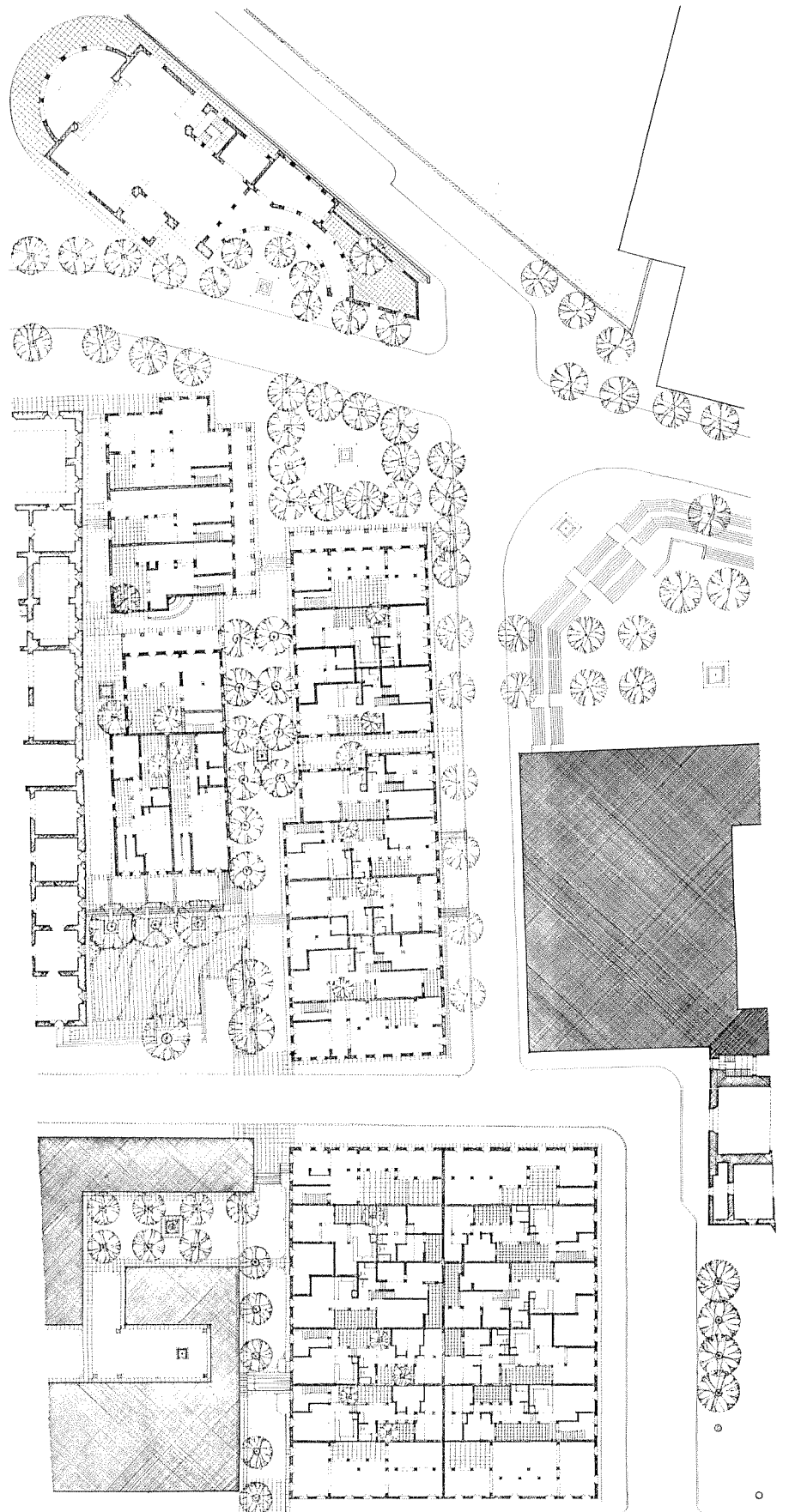
Restore the existing vacant/abandoned buildings in the Quarter, specifically the Ballajá and Beneficiencia buildings. The interior courtyard of the Ballajá building, the largest open space in the city, should be made a usable and accessible public urban element.

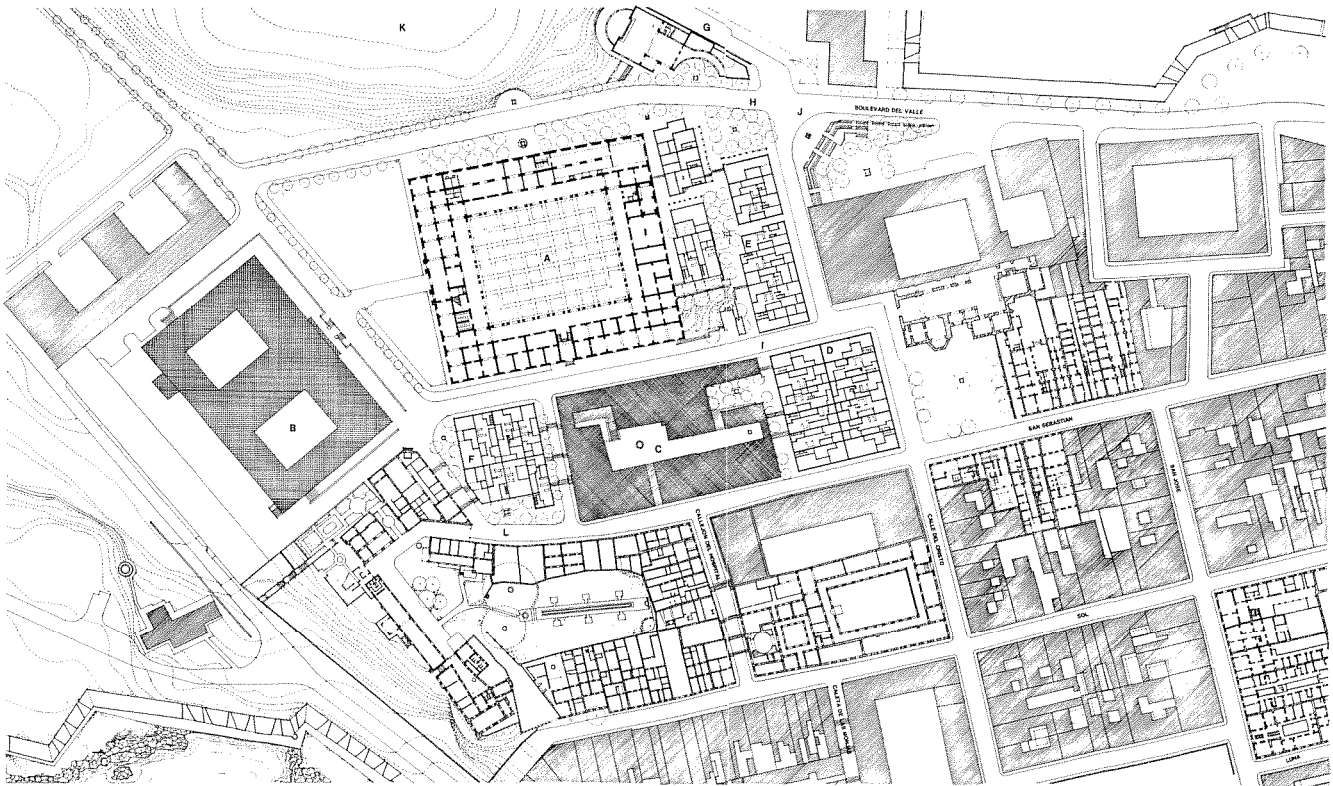
Design a new building on the Boulevard del Valle to house the Institute of Spanish Lexicography, replacing the existing dilapidated 1950s building on the same site.

Design and build a new block and *plazuela* on San Sebastián Street at the entry of the Casa Blanca Complex on what presently is a vacant lot.

A Vocabulary and a Plan for Ballajá

Form elements have meaning. The physical characteristics of these elements, such as balconies, *medios puntos*, and doors or the city's





26

26 Ballajá Quarter reconstructed:

- A. Restored Cuartel de Ballajá building;
- B. Restored Beneficiencia building;
- C. Restored Hospital de la Concepción building;
- D. New housing block 1; E. New housing block 2; F. New housing block 3;
- G. New Instituto de Lexicografía building and Theater Hall;
- H. New Plaza del Descubrimiento;
- I. New pedestrian street linking the city with El Morro;
- J. New steps and plaza of the Institute of Culture;
- K. El Morro grounds;
- L. New *plazuela* at the end of San Sebastián Street

patios and plazas, tell us how these places are inhabited. But, for different people and under different conditions and circumstances, they give rise to different associations and meanings. The design of a form vocabulary for Ballajá is intended to reinforce the collective understanding of the place as a whole yet allow for the individual's interpretation and identification with its parts.

Since the sites in the Ballajá Quarter are already predefined by the city structure, the block takes on the role of the building unit for the Quarter. The initial step in the design of the blocks is the development of a "support structure." John Habraken defines a support structure as a primary physical definition in which a number of units can be built and which permits the construction, modification, or demolition of each dwelling separately, without involving other dwellings in the same support structure. For Ballajá these support structures are based

on the principal rules of position and dimension reported in the earlier observations and analyses: two- and three-story concrete infrastructures with openings for the interior patios. The design accommodates the possibility of multiple patios and two positions for stairs. Where a unit was to have a single owner, the stairs are positioned in the *zaguán* (zone A1). In a duplex unit, the stairs are positioned in the interior of the unit (zone A2).

Different tests were conducted to study the support structure's capacity to accept a variety of arrangements and dispositions of secondary and tertiary elements, such as partitions, closures, fixtures, and, of course, furniture. The result was a support structure composed of six elements: two corner supports, parallel bearing party walls, a displaced party wall, and the resulting territory of this displacement. This territory can accommodate a studio apartment; a shop, office or workshop; or an

outside open place, either claimed by the street or shared by two units as a common courtyard.

One major change was made to the existing housing typology. While the existing residential structures are primarily organized through the subdivision and compartmentalization of the unit into discrete rooms, the new units are designed with an open and continuous plan in the collective quarters, utilizing the interior patio as the major organizing element in the house. The private quarters, however, are still separate rooms, but each opens to a patio or a gallery, facilitating cross-ventilation and natural light.

Use, human scale, and context dimensions for floor heights determine the support system's vertical zones and regulate the position of the elements in the facade. Elements and openings are designed in relation to the width of the support types. Similar to the tests described for the support system's plan, the facade zone was tested for its capacity to hold a variety of arrangements. The facades in San Juan constitute a language with four levels, listed from smallest to largest:

Subelements, comprising doors, *medios puntos*, *ojos de buey*, and transoms;

Elements, such as door and window assemblages, which are discrete collections of subelements;

Subsystems, such as balconies, *antepechos*, and verandas, which

are formed by the aggregation of elements;

Facade/Site Systems, which are composed of subsystems and whose arrangement and characteristics change depending on the number of stories.

Ballajá Reclaimed

The reconstructed fabric of the Ballajá Quarter brings to San Juan a renewed vitality and physical character that has been lost for more than half a century. The strategy outlined in this paper envisions sixty new residential units and ten commercial and office spaces to complement the restoration of the Quarter's grand buildings, Beneficiencia and Ballajá, for institutional, governmental, and cultural uses. Two new plazas, one paved and the other one a green park, create new places for people to meet and relax. The paved plaza, with an arcade of commerce and restaurants, serves as a gate to the city and to El Morro. Across the street, a new building houses the Instituto de Lexicografía. Its new auditorium, used for lectures, concerts, and other public functions, brings new cultural life to the Quarter. To the side of the plaza, the overpowering retaining wall that bordered the Instituto de Cultura has been restructured. While keeping its 17th century segment, a series of new monumental steps lead to the old convent. Two new pedestrian streets complete the system defined by the Caleta de las Monjas and the Callejón del Hospital, providing

uninterrupted pedestrian access to the green grounds of El Morro. The old fortress is finally made part of the city. A city has finally recovered a piece of itself.

Note

1 The documentation for this study was commissioned and partially funded by the Institute of Culture and the Office for Cultural Affairs of the Puerto Rican government.