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## Places

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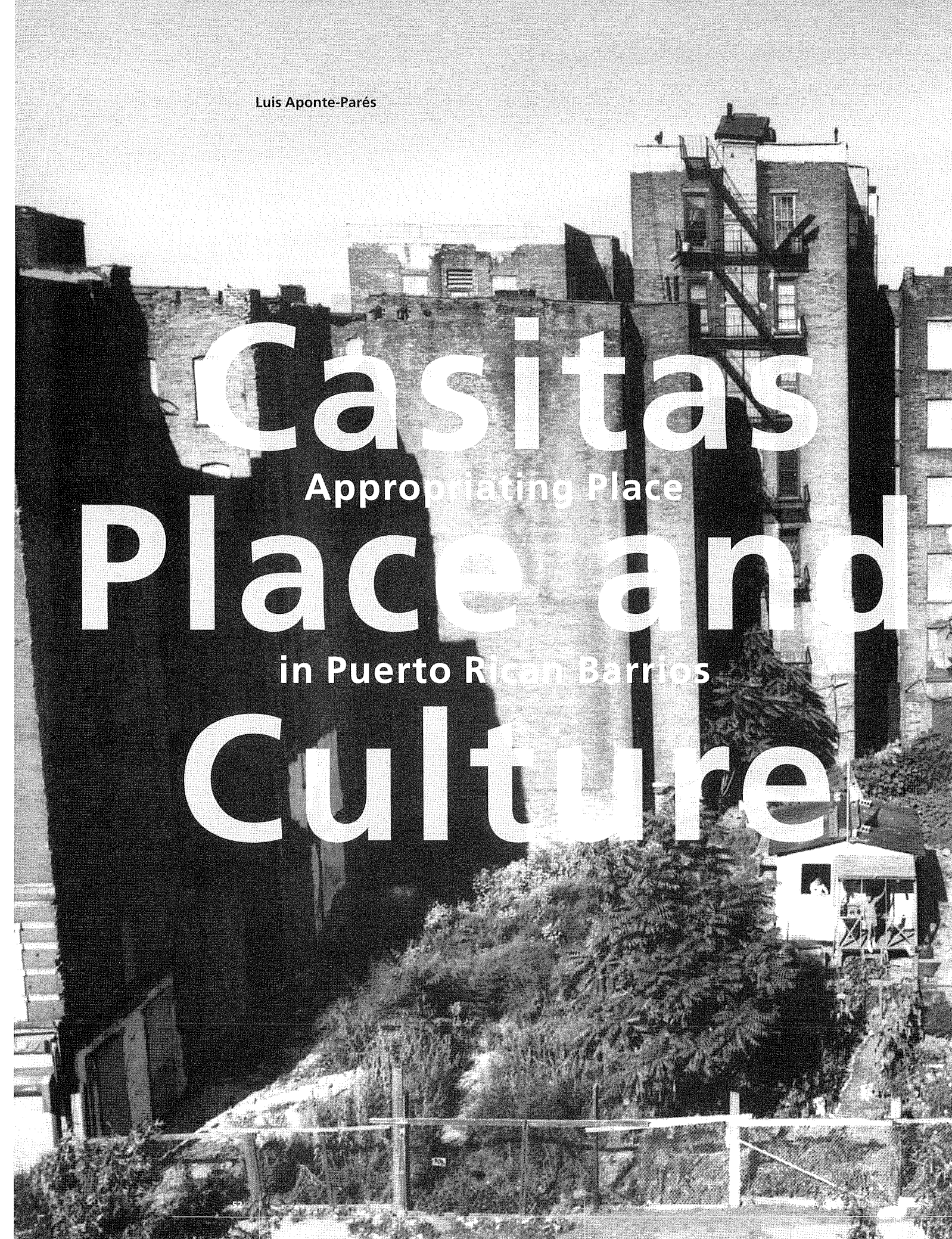
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**Casitas**  
Appropriating Place  
**Place and**  
in Puerto Rican Barrios  
**Culture**





Jaran's face filled with joyful pride as he showed us photos  
of the latest party held at his *casita*, or “little house.”  
He recalled building it with his family and neighbors  
at 142nd and St. Ann streets in the South Bronx some years back,  
and how they christened  
it with that evocative name, Villa Puerto Rico.

Looking through the photos, he spoke of the many times Villa Puerto Rico had served the neighborhood as place for celebrations and get-togethers of all kinds: birthday parties, Puerto Rican Day Parade ceremonies, Thanksgiving dinners, block association meetings and political rallies. Not only

these events but also the *casita* itself is a source of pride and memory — it articulates and validates the neighbors' Puerto Rican identity in space.

Villa Puerto Rico embodies the endurance of Puerto Rican culture in New York and the strength of Jaran and his neighbors in appropriating the environment and conferring meaning to it by building alter-

native landscapes. On 142nd Street, and throughout the South Bronx, East Harlem (el Barrio), the Lower East Side (Loisaida) and Brooklyn, *casitas* stand as cogent metaphors of place and culture.<sup>1</sup>

*Casitas* belong to a family of wooden, balloon-frame structures generally associated with Third World vernacular architecture. Built on stilts and surrounded with land (often used as a vegetable garden), they can be identified by their corrugated metal gable roofs, shuttered windows, bright colors and ample verandas, so favored in the Caribbean. This architecture took shape during the nineteenth century, when increased trade between the Caribbean and the U.S. led to exchanges of people and culture, bringing about

the transformation and modernization of the islands' traditional or vernacular architecture.<sup>2</sup>

*Casitas* built in New York have specific roots in Puerto Rico and are generally located in neighborhoods that witnessed massive population displacement in the past three decades and now suffer from extreme poverty. In these neighborhoods, large tracts of empty land are surrounded by abandoned tenements and “tower-in-the-park” enclaves, legacies of government housing paradigms that were envisioned, perhaps, as instruments that helped “eradicate the most vocal and visible pockets of non-white inner-city life”<sup>3</sup> and were so successful in fracturing the city.

#### Displacement, Replacement and an Architecture of Resistance

Jaran's smile betrays the deeper role and complex meaning that these humble structures have assumed in the lives of his fellow Puerto Ricans in New York City. As industrial jobs relocated from New York to other parts of the world, significant numbers of displaced workers and their families were not integrated into the new economy. In recent years, the influx of immigrants has created additional economic pressure.

At the same time, massive dislocations impacted working-poor neighborhoods throughout New York, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of homes. Not all neighborhoods fared equally. Some became surplus with diminished value to the financial hub; el Barrio, for example, lost close to one third of its structures. Others,



Villa Puerto Rico, 142nd Street and Brook Avenue, the Bronx. Photos by Luis Aponte-Parés unless otherwise indicated.

Photos on previous pages by Martha Cooper.



Balcón Criollo in East Harlem.  
Below: *Casita* on 119th Street,  
East Harlem.

like Loisaida, experienced gentrification. Still others became places of arrival for new immigrants, perhaps becoming a new or reconfigured borderland. These high-density ethnic enclaves burst with the dynamism and energy of Third World metropolises like New Delhi, Mexico City and São Paulo.

For Puerto Ricans and others, this has led to an increased poverty rate, increased dependence in transfer payments and an overall decline in living standards. Also, growing numbers of New Yorkers are connected with the informal, “floating,” illegal or underground economy. This is reflected in changes in the landscape — an increased presence of street vendors, illegal sweatshops, squatters, cardboard condos, “Bushvilles” and *casitas*; alternative, informal landscapes of the post-industrial city.

The losses, of course, were not only of buildings and people, but also of primary “life spaces,” places in which people’s “dreams were made and their lives unfolded.”<sup>4</sup> This signalled the detachment of a people from their most recent history, their memories, *sus memorias*, rendering them invisible and making them guests in the neighborhoods to which they were forcibly relocated. The decline and loss of institutions, bodegas, churches, social centers, schools, friends and neighbors has led to a collective need for people to play an active role in rearranging the environment, and thereby restoring the community’s sense of well being.

These transformations have led to sharper contrasts in the everyday spaces of New York, a

divergence in the quality of life among various neighborhoods, perhaps greater than ever before, and the rise of a unique form of an American urban apartheid: “fortress cities” brutally divided into “fortified cells of affluence” and “places of terror” where police battle the criminalized poor. As class polarization increases, there is an increasing inequality in different populations’ ability to choose where to build and appropriate place, the foundation of their identity as people in a neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

Thus *casitas* are built by the disenfranchised urban poor, who live in landscapes of pollution, joblessness and violence, are increasingly invisible to the rest of society and represent the underside of the “triad imagery of post-industrial landscapes like Silicon Valley, i.e. ecology, leisure and liveability.” Predictably, they are the same people who are unable to buy manufactured landscapes and are left out of information circuits, representing “lag-times — temporary breaks in the imaginary matrix” of the new city.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, in cyber-city, the city ostensibly with no spatial needs, the virtual electronic city of computers and modems linking together every place in the globe, the need for meaningful, precious places that validate cultural identities in space may have increased.

It was to address these needs that Jaran and







El Jaragual, *casita* on 103rd Street, East Harlem.  
Photo by Zyduia Nazain.

others like him and their families chose to take an active role in reshaping landscapes of despair into landscapes of hope: transforming fragmented and discontinuous urban landscapes into “cultural forms with continuity” that are rich in values and bring forth a sense of “attachment” — a feeling

of “congruence of culture and landscape” — while, perhaps, providing them a sense of regional identity.<sup>7</sup> Key to this attachment is the ability to take possession of the environment simultaneously through physical orientation and through a more profound identification.

But Jaran and other builders of *casitas* can hardly boast the means to build model communi-

ties; their will to reshape is tempered by meager resources and recent history. Their language is one of circumscribed impact, where holding ground, turf, *rescatar*, takes on the primary role, a true architecture of resistance subverting the traditional city. The *casita*, like the ubiquitous Puerto Rican flag, becomes a vehicle through which their builders articulate and defend their national identity, their imagined community, their innate essence, who they are.<sup>8</sup>

**The Puerto Rican Experience:  
From Bodegas to Casitas**

Since arriving in New York early in this century, Puerto Ricans have defied severe housing prob-

lems, involuntary resettlement being the most disruptive. After decades of slowly giving shape, character and meaning to many life spaces in places like Bellevue, Chelsea, Lincoln Square and Hell’s Kitchen, Puerto Ricans began to lose the weak control they had gained over their environment.

From the 1950s through the mid-1970s, urban renewal and the private market intersected to accelerate displacement, inducing a “process of loss, rupture and deterritorialization” of a whole community.<sup>9</sup> Building community was less an act of settling and shaping neighborhoods and more a process of a people being expelled from place to place by the relocation officers of city agencies, unscrupulous landlords or the heat from the last fire.

This removal of buildings and people resulted in the erasure of images that recorded Latinos’ cultural presence in New York, including contributions they had made to the built environment, the replacement of historical and personal narratives, and the loss of memory.<sup>9</sup>

By choosing names like Villa Puerto Rico, El Jaragual, Añoranzas de mi Patria and Rincón Criollo, *casita* builders introduce and defend the possibility of place, both physical and metaphorical. The practice of building *casitas* imparts identity to the urban landscape by rescuing images, *rescatando imágenes*, and by alluding to the power of other places everybody recognizes, feels good towards and can identify with.

Building *casitas* is an act that both affirms the



*Casita* on 8th Street,  
Lower East Side.

power of culture in space and offers resistance to further deterritorialization. *Casitas* become place to displaced people, new “urban bedouins” removed from other places. Perhaps they also become new invented traditions, new segregated public arenas in which “the other” can congregate and celebrate their self-identity in a city where their invisibility in the public discourse renders many of them non-personae, at best, or personae-non-grata, at worst, and where unifying and inclusive images of the urban narrative seem to be fading daily.<sup>10</sup>

Puerto Rican migration patterns have been fundamental to the development of *casitas*. As colonial citizens of the U.S., Puerto Ricans circulate freely between two spaces, colony and metropolis, thus circumventing barriers traditionally associated with borders, or *fronteras*. This condition has provided several generations ongoing contact with fresh images of the *otra Patria*, the homeland, providing a fluid exchange of people, culture and images.

The commuting airplane has been an agent linking contiguous social realities, Puerto Rico and Nueva York. East Harlem and La Perla, a shanty area in San Juan, are more closely connected, culturally, than East Harlem and Battery Park City. Hence, *casita* builders, when introducing the *casita* language to Nueva York, do more than provide places for the local neighborhood. They also release a new urban language, a Caribbean vernacular, to many the language of Third World *favelas*, squatters’ shanties, *arrabales* or *villas miserias*.

There is something ominous about the presence of *casitas* on the streets of New York, something threatening to many people who may otherwise live in relative security. The abiding message of the *casita* is one of shelter, a squatters’ metaphor many find disturbing, particularly in the increasing presence of the wandering homeless in the most advanced and richest urban center in the world. *Casitas* signal that the visual discourse of *favelas*, *arrabales*, *comunidades marginadas* — the destitute slums ringing the periphery of Third World cities — has its place in the developed world, alongside concocted theme parks, places for the rich, “dreamscapes of visual consumption.” They become “conquered

space,” where the “separation of the Puerto Rican Diaspora is defeated.”<sup>11</sup>

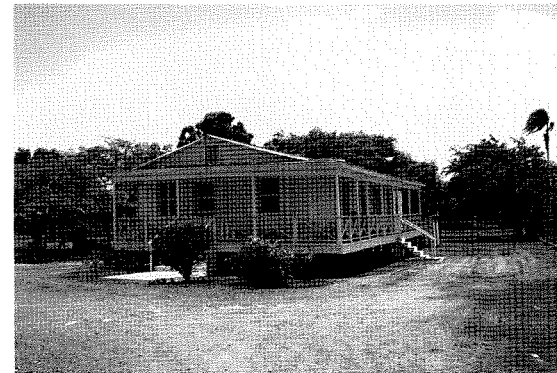
### Popular Dwelling and Changing Urban Landscapes

*Casitas* represent the amalgamation of architectural styles and building techniques from Europe and North America with those from two other cultures — the Amerindians, who contributed the common hut (*bobío*), and the Africans, who gave the *bobío* its final configuration in the plantation hut. *Casitas* evoke a pan-Caribbean language, shared among all the islands (although manifested somewhat differently in each) and regions that were in close trading contact with them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Before Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico was called Borikén and was home to the Taíno, descendants of Arawak cultures. The Taíno lived in *yucayeques*, nucleations whose principal structures were the *caney*, the *cacique*’s home, and the *bobío*. *Yucayeques* were organized around a central open plaza, the *batey*.

Between 1509, with the founding of Caparra, the first European settlement in Puerto Rico, and 1535, when the conquest of the continent began, between 5,000 to 50,000 people were conquered and permanently displaced. The Spanish destroyed all *yucayeques* and resettled the people of Puerto Rico into *encomiendas* (medieval institutions that were recreated as compounds for the purpose of colonization), where they were enslaved to mine for gold. The attendant loss of place and identity contributed to the eventual eradication of the Taíno.

The invaders soon abandoned the island and their *encomiendas*, but only after having demolished the territorial systems of the indigenous people. *Bobíos* and a reconstituted *batey* endured, nonetheless, as the common dwelling and the fundamental cultural space, albeit at a personal-family scale, particularly in the countryside. In time, this became associated with the yard adjacent to the peasant’s home. *Bobío* and *batey*



*Casita* “ideal” outside Ponce, Puerto Rico.

became foundations of a Puerto Rican vernacular that expressed its dual parentage: the Taíno and the African.

Between 1535 and 1830 the *mestizaje*, or cross-breeding, of the Taíno, African and Spanish cultures occurred as the island slowly repopulated. In these years, the major spatio-cultural arenas were the farm and the town. The farm (homestead), was isolated and severely limited by the island's mountainous topography. *Bobíos* and, later, *casas de hacendados*, were the principal structures in the self-contained social and economic compounds of *haciendas* throughout the centuries.

Towns each had a public place, usually an unadorned plaza, often no more than a clearing, at the center. The plaza was surrounded by symbols of European power — church and *cabildo* — religious and civil government buildings that formed the core of the meager new civic life. The plaza was also where informal markets and religious festivities occurred. It mediated between the town

and its hinterland, while attesting to the hegemony — control of European culture over the island's landscapes.

This territorial differentiation made for sharper class demarcation in housing structures, particularly between the *bobíos* of the *jibaros*, or rural peasants, and the *casas* of the townspeople, usually clergy, artisans, merchants and military. *Casas* were made of

wood or masonry, emulating Spanish or other European architectural styles, and those owned by merchants being the most elaborate. *Bobíos* were the pre-Columbian huts that peasant — slaves had appropriated; their building characteristics retained an organic relationship to the local ecology and they changed very slowly, their builders adhering to traditional building methods. The quality of *bobíos* varied in relation to their owner's social position; those of slaves and the landless, *agregados*, were possibly the most rustic and least evolved from the original Taíno dwelling.

One pictorial record of this differentiation is found in *El Velorio*, a painting made in 1893 by the Puerto Rican artist Francisco Oller. *El Velorio*

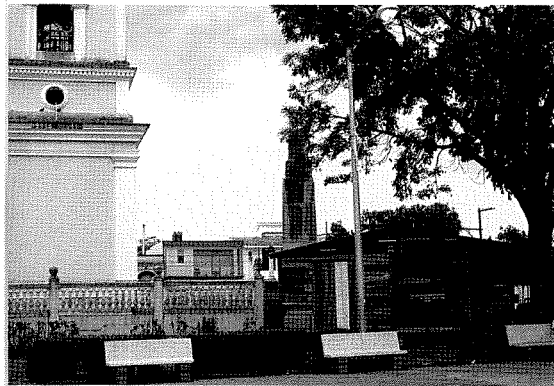
depicts a peasant child's wake, a *jibaro* celebration emulating a Baquiné, a traditional African ritual.<sup>13</sup> The site of the celebration is not a large public place, such as a church or a plaza, but a *jibaro's* home — which comprises a *bobío*, a small, rustic, single-room hut, and, possibly, an outside room, the *batey*.

The *bobío* depicted in the painting has a wooden floor isolating the structure from the terrain, protecting it from the elements, a significant improvement over early Taíno huts built on compacted dirt. Doors and windows have double shutters, a clear reference to Spanish architecture. The walls, although framed by tree trunks, are covered by a skin of commercial-grade wood on the outside. It appears that the house has a balcony or veranda on one side. The hut is covered by tree trunks that support a more humble thatch roof.

Apparently, the *bobío* is still a one-room configuration. Although sparse, the furniture depicted in the painting, a comfortable chair and wooden table covered with lace, suggests that the family is either of some economic means or borrowed these pieces for the occasion.

The *bobío* in *El Velorio* had become a new structure, an emerging vernacular combining cultural elements from three sources: from the Taíno, the hut; from Africans, the ritual and the building hands; and from the Spanish, the furnishings and the structure with the added veranda. It coincided with the birth of a national identity that evolved throughout the nineteenth century. It codified a rural emblem, a narrative of the transition from folk to popular culture, from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist society — an emblem that has survived throughout the twentieth century.

The *jibaro's* home had become the center of his life, an integral part of the declining subsistence existence that had been the dominant economic mode of the island for over three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule. To deeply rural people like the *jibaros*, their isolation on their farms was a centripetal force that bonded them to their land and neighbors. Events like that depicted in *El Velorio* provided social and cultural bonding in the most important of the ordinary landscapes of the period: the rural *bobío* and the *batey*, suggesting poverty as well as independence.



Vintage 1930s casita reconstructed in the center of Cabo Rojo, a town on the southern coast of Puerto Rico.





*El Velorio* (Francisco Oller, 1893). Courtesy University of Puerto Rico Museum of Art.

### Urban and Rural *Casitas*

In the nineteenth century the spectacular growth of commercial agriculture brought new wealth to the poor island, incorporated Puerto Rico into world markets and brought it into ever closer interaction with other cultures, particularly that of the United States. The island's territorial systems were reshaped to facilitate the production of commodities for export. The early port cities, where Europeans and Creole elites managed trade, gained power and prestige over the rest of the island.

In the early twentieth century, the collapsing coffee economy resulted in massive migration from the *altura*, or highlands. Meanwhile, in the *bajura*, or lowlands, the expanding sugar economy resulted in the construction of sugar factories, or *centrales*. These compounds enabled the production sugar at a great scale, and at times were even larger than the built-up cores of many towns.

Balloon-frame construction, the underlying building technique of *casitas*, was introduced in the large compounds of worker housing built around the *centrales*. The generalized adoption of this imported technology signalled the commodification of the popular dwelling, accelerating the loss of traditional building techniques, an essential element of the collective narrative of rural society. The popular dwelling was now linked more strongly to the economic forces of the marketplace, signalling its transformation from vernacular architecture to an architecture of the poor, both urban and rural.

In the *bajura*, before long, many of the new arrivals became surplus labor as the new economy could not absorb them. By the 1940s, most were compelled to migrate once again, this time to the island's urban nucleations. The built-up areas in the center of these urban areas served as residential quarters for the elites and for a very small middle class (mostly professionals), as well as the location of major civic, cultural and economic institutions.

The new arrivals were driven to marginal or peripheral lands of less value, usually along rivers or on swampland. *Casitas* became the principal form of shelter in these new communities.

Urban *casitas* were called upon to serve added functions, particularly for new arrivals whose skills were not needed in the city. Unable to own farmland, a necessity for survival, most *casita* dwellers created small subsistence farms, small plots of land surrounding the shanties, where they could raise chickens and a pig or two and grow a few staples. The garden became an integral element of the urban *casita*.

By the 1950s a second wave of industrialization transformed the island's economy. The introduction of *urbanizaciones*, tract suburban housing,



Middle-class urban *casitas* in Ponce, Puerto Rico.



Restored working class casitas in Ponce, Puerto Rico.

made older working-class neighborhoods obsolete and exploded residential districts into class-specific, segregated segments. The generalized adoption of concrete construction technology and tract housing produced further differentiation in popular dwellings. Wooden architecture (in casitas) was further reduced to housing for the truly urban poor, the working poor in outlying towns and people in rural communities attempting to survive as farmers.

As Puerto Rico continued to transform to an industrial society, from traditional to modern, casitas acquired a new status in the island's lore. They became part of the narrative that recalled the destruction of a peasant agricultural society, one that seemed less threatening when looked at from a distant time.

Puerto Rican migration to New York City and elsewhere peaked during the same period. To those who left, images of casitas were implanted in their collective memory as emblems of the old world, a "fantasized paradise"<sup>14</sup> they left behind. These images collapsed ecological, social and built landscapes into a new symbolic architectural language.

To those who remained on the island, casitas became repositories of tradition, modulating change while assuring permanence and the transmission of a legacy.<sup>15</sup> When I visited Plaza de Cabo Rojo, a very old town on Puerto Rico's southern coast, I found an vintage 1930 casita constructed in the center of town. A group of women sitting in a park nearby reported that there had just been a town festival celebrating Puerto Rican

#### Notes

This essay was supported by the Bronx Council on the Arts, and by a Rockefeller-Schomburg Fellowship.

1. In the last decade, many casitas have been destroyed by fire or actions of the city government, which fears they would be generalized as squatters settlements. Villa Puerto Rico, one of the oldest casitas in the South

Bronx, was rebuilt in 1991.

2. John Newel Lewis, *Ajoupa, Architecture of the Caribbean, Trinidad's Heritage* (Trinidad: J. Newel Lewis, 1983); Roberto Segre, "Continuidad y Renovación de las Tradiciones Vernaculas en el Ambiente Caribeño Contemporáneo," in *Anales del Caribe* 4-5 (1984-1985); Jack Bertelot and Martine Gaumé, *Kaz Antiyé: Jan Moun Ka Réte,*

*Caribbean Popular Dwelling* (Point-à-Pitre: Editions Perspectives Créoles, 1982); Luis Aponte-Parés, *Casas y Bobios: Territorial Development and Urban Growth in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1990.

3. Trevor Boddy, "Underground and Overhead: Building the Analogous City," in Michael Sorkin, ed.,

*Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Noonday, 1992), 134.

4. John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff, "World City Formation: An Agenda for Research and Action," in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 6:3 (September, 1992): 326.

5. Mike Davis, "Fortress Los Angeles: The Militariza-

tion of Urban Space," in Sorkin, 155; Richard Harris, "The Geography of Employment and Residence in New York Since 1950," in John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells, eds., *Dual City: Restructuring New York* (New York: Sage, 1992).

6. Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17;

culture, and that when townsfolk were identifying a “universal symbol” of Puerto Rican culture from the earlier part of the century, the *casita* won by acclamation. They found one and rebuilt it in the middle of the town plaza.

### Casitas and the Puerto Rican Diaspora

The accelerated migration of people of Hispanic origins to the U.S. and the cultural impact they are having represent opportunities to be explored. More than one third of all Puerto Ricans live outside of Puerto Rico. New York is home to the largest urban concentration of Puerto Ricans anywhere, followed by San Juan, Chicago and possibly Ponce. Increasingly, Puerto Rican immigrants from earlier periods return to the island to retire.

Circular migration continually exchanges people and refreshes cultural images; thus, *casitas* continue to be summoned by Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in New York, as metaphors of places past. On the island, their rebirth may have been ignited by economic and cultural forces.

Lumber companies, for example, responding to worsening and divergent economic conditions, have promoted new uses for balloon-frame construction. Economically strapped urban dwellers can build wooden additions to their homes. The small group who can afford to build leisure homes can construct second homes, *casas de campo*, nostalgic references to yesterday’s *quintas*.

This occurrence has resulted in peculiar typologies being built across the island, in *urban-*

*izaciones* as well as in poor rural areas, where *casitas* are built atop flat-roofed concrete tract housing. To those who can afford the second home in an exurban microfarm, the *casita* brings them closer to their identity as Puertorriqueños in a rapidly changing world and island. To those who recall them in New York, *casitas* grant their builders, like Jaran, with the power of place and culture, in a city that has yet to offer many of them acceptance, and a sense that they belong and are accepted.



Casita atop a concrete house, Puerto Rico.

Christine M. Boyer, “The Imaginary Real World,” *Assemblage* 18 (1992): 115-127; Saurie Oulette, “Information Age Lockout” in *Utne Reader* (September/October 1993).  
7. Robert Riley, “Attachment to the Ordinary Landscape,” in Irwin Altman and Setha Low, *Place Attachment* (New York: Plenum, 1992), 17.  
8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

9. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika* (Minnesota: Graywolf, 1993).  
10. On urban bedouins, see Mike Davis, “Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space,” in Sorkin, 164. On invented traditions, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

11. Patricia Leigh Brown, “The Architecture of Those Called Homeless,” *New York Times* (28 March 1993); Zukin; Celedonio Abad, “El Espacio Conquistado,” in the catalogue for the exhibit, *La Casa de Todos Nosotros*, by artist Antonio Martorell (New York: Museo del Barrio, 1992).

12. These areas include all Caribbean islands; the coastal, southern and Gulf states in the U.S.; and the Caribbean-facing areas of South and Central America.  
13. Puerto Rican cultural critic Guillermo Ramírez has been unable to identify similar events in African culture in the Americas. He argues that *El Velorio* depicts a Spanish religious custom, finding

evidence in other Spanish paintings of the period.  
14. Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1993), 135.  
16. María Elena Rodríguez Castro, “Las Casas del porvenir: Nación y Narración en el Ensayo Puertorriqueño,” in *Revista Iberoamericana*, 162-163 (enero-junio 1993): 37.