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Skating the Surrounds: Chemi Rosado-Seijo's *El Bowl* in La Perla, Puerto Rico

Alida R. Jekabson

Outside the colonial walls of San Juan, Puerto Rico lies the neighborhood of La Perla. Weaving through narrow streets and staircases on the steep, coastal terrain, one is surrounded by homes, businesses and other buildings, many inhabited and brightly painted, while others remain neglected. At the edge of the built environment, the coastline on the north of the island offers a view of the Atlantic Ocean. Among the roofless walls covered with murals and graffiti, an oblong concrete structure stands approximately 6 feet deep and 40 feet wide: Chemi Rosado-Seijo's *El Bowl* (figs. 1, 2).

El Bowl rises from the coastline, its curved yellow rim contrasting the Atlantic's blue waves. Handmade stairs lead up to the edge of the Bowl. Visible among graffiti markings across the concave, concrete surface is the form of a large shark, its fins shown cut away from its body. The painted image is weathered, with older coats of paint exposed at the bottom of the Bowl. These signs of wear are the first clues to the structure's use as one of the few public skateboarding ramps in the San Juan area. The rim of the structure bears the markings of skateboard wheels that have caught the lip of *El Bowl* as they prepare to glide downwards. At the bottom of the structure is a small hole, approximately two inches in diameter. This opening is essential to the hybrid character of *El Bowl*. On weekends, the hole is plugged up, and the bowl is filled with water and becomes a swimming pool for the residents (fig. 2).

During the week, the concrete structure is dry and empty of swimmers. Its use depends on an informal agreement between skateboarders and residents as to when *El*



Figure 1: *El Bowl*, 2018, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo by the author.

Bowl serves as a pool or ramp. Standing at the yellow edge, one can admire the structure and the painted forms of the work, while also taking in the views of the ocean and El Morro, a sixteenth-century citadel built during Spanish colonial rule. *El Bowl* marks a boundary between sea and earth, between the inner and outer colonial walls of the city. It can be filled or unfilled, and used by both residents and visiting skateboarders. Since its inception, the site has also marked a threshold between art and commerce in the gentrification of the urban space of San Juan.

El Bowl, a public space oscillating between artistic and commercial audiences, is also a testimony to Rosado-Seijo's contribution to many communities within Puerto Rico who have traditionally experienced limited access to recreational resources.¹ The

¹The artist's community engagement work is epitomized by a sixteen-year project in the El Cerro community, located in the mountains an hour from San Juan. Over the years, most of the buildings have been repainted shades of green through the artist's effort to revive the town center and highlight the relationship between the natural and built environment. Á.R. Vázquez-Concepción, "El Cerro: A social practice work by artist Chemi Rosado-Seijo, ongoing since 2002," *Cranium Corporation*, April 21, 2016,



Figure 2: *El Bowl*, 2020, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Courtesy of iStock.com/StreetMuse.

ramp and pool engage with the architectural history of La Perla and the area's liminal relationship to the urban landscape of San Juan. Situated outside of the city walls, the neighborhood was cut off from municipal services until recent decades. By examining this complex site, my aim is to trace the inception, building, and reception of *El Bowl* as indicative of a type of border space that urbanist AbdouMaliq Simone calls "the surrounds," one that allows for a "rehearsal of experimental ways of living."² This rehearsal, for what Simone calls an "unprecedented" way of living, relates to *El Bowl* and its collaborative construction and use. Although the builders, skateboarders, and residents were already well versed in their respective histories of architecture and design, the participation of these communities at the same site, a first for both, can be viewed as a "rehearsal." For Simone, the correlating concept of the "surrounds" encapsulates this kind of "relationship among spaces, whose complexion exceeds their function while maintaining them and whose functions are never clearly stabilized because they seem to absorb the multiplicity of characteristics that makes up the place

<https://craniumcorporation.org/2016/04/21/el-cerro-a-social-practice-work-by-artist-chemi-rosado-seijo-ongoing-since-2002/>.

² AbdouMaliq Simone, *The Surrounds: Urban Life Within and Beyond Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 6.

of the surrounds.”³ Simone stresses that “the surrounds is a product of *relational location* rather than geographic one.”⁴ The ongoing relations between communities, the local and federal government, and popular culture figures have contributed to the site’s construction, and aids in the visibility of La Perla within the sphere of media tourism.

El Bowl, completed in 2006 by Rosado-Seijo, first emerged in response to the artist’s skateboarding practice, but developed and transformed into an occasion for collaboration and social engagement with multiple communities. The interactive and multi-functional demands of *El Bowl* are integral to its continued use. Throughout his career, Rosado-Seijo has relied on the skateboarding bowl form, reflecting a larger trend in the contemporary art world toward nomadic, site-specific projects that are replicated and installed in museums, galleries, as well as public spaces. Art historian Miwon Kwon has traced the development of site-specific art, arguing that by the 1990s, installation practices with roots in the postwar era were often commissioned to be re-created or restaged in order to meet institutional demands, as well as to further artist’s careers.⁵ Artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and art collectives such as Futurefarmers rely on community to complete their social practice-based works, which are often replicated in similar forms across many locations. Other more recent traveling installations, such as Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Rooms*, circulate within the realm of blue-chip galleries and museums. Installations such as Kusama’s rely on participants to generate attention via social media, inevitably contributing to funds for the host institutions. In this case, Rosado-Seijo’s *El Bowl* and the artist’s sustained engagement with the La Perla and skateboarding communities are rooted in the history of social practice art, which often takes the form of large-scale installations or events. The media images generated from *El Bowl* and the increasing tourist popularity of the La Perla neighborhood also inadvertently place this project on the boundary of more consumer-driven art installations.

Building In and With La Perla

In a 2018 interview, the artist commented that he wanted *El Bowl* to be about “building an object that has the aesthetics and parts of La Perla to talk about La

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 46. Kwon cites the example of Fred Wilson’s 1992 project *Mining the Museum*. Wilson’s project was originally staged at the Baltimore Historical Society in Maryland. Other museums subsequently commissioned Wilson to rehang their permanent collections, demonstrating that within the development of nomadic, site-specific installations, “the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on ‘criticality.’”



Figure 3: Aerial view of Old San Juan and La Perla, 2016. *El Bowl* is visible in the lower left corner. Courtesy of iStock/Requejo Films.

Perla.”⁶ La Perla became a symbol of poverty and crime in San Juan in the early twentieth century. The area, outside the official walls of the city, takes its name from the La Perla *ravelin*, a triangular fortification built outside the city in the seventeenth century.⁷ Differentiating La Perla from other “slums” in the Global South is the neighborhoods’ picturesque coastal location (fig. 3). In many ways, La Perla is illustrative of major urban themes of the twentieth century, as outlined by architectural historian Florian Urban. According to Urban, “irrespective of the dominant interpretation, formal and informal elements were always vying for each other in La Perla.”⁸ Urban’s definition resonates with Simone’s concept of the surrounds in an urban environment. The surrounds are liminal, “left over(s)” from designated urban spaces, a phenomenon Simone describes as an “intricate suturing of bodily comportment, movement, exposure...into a collective choreography producing space

⁶ Chemi Rosado Seijo interviewed by Daniel Rodriguez, April 21, 2018, video, 10:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTpVXcR-oZA>.

⁷ Florian Urban, “La Perla – 100 years of informal architecture in San Juan, Puerto Rico,” *Planning Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (2015): 498.

⁸ Urban, “La Perla,” 496.



Figure 4: A street in La Perla, 1938, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo by Edwin Rosskam. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.

of unsettled invention..."⁹ La Perla and the site of *El Bowl* both reflect the tension, or choreography, between the residents and artist interlocutors, and the qualities of impermanence, invention, and exposure named by Urban and Simone.

When the walls around San Juan were built, during the Spanish colonial era, Spanish law did not allow for a cemetery or slaughterhouse within the city bounds for hygienic reasons.¹⁰ These sites were placed outside the walls, in what is now La Perla (fig. 3). By the close of the nineteenth century, La Perla

was populated by former agrarian workers who relocated to the city from the rural mountain areas. The United States' invasion of the island during the 1898 Spanish-American War contributed to a changing economy. More people moved to urban centers like San Juan as farming practices that served the island population shifted to monoculture farming and the export of products such as sugar.¹¹ Domestic and industrial workers, some formerly enslaved, were forced into areas like La Perla that were less developed and less expensive.

By 1913, La Perla had formalized from a grouping of wooden houses near the slaughterhouses into a rental neighborhood. A small group of landowners rented land to the urban poor, who then built their own houses.¹² In the 1920s and '30s, official *ranchóns* for slaughterhouse workers were built in La Perla. These one-story structures were often built around planned streets and staircases that provided navigation

⁹ Simone, *The Surrounds*, 6, 92.

¹⁰ Jean M. Caldieron, "Land Tenure and the Self-Improvement of Two Latin American Informal Settlements in Puerto Rico and Venezuela," *Urban Forum* 24 (2013): 56.

¹¹ Alvarez-Curbelo Silvia and Anibal Sepúlveda-Rivera, *De vuelta a la ciudad: San Juan de Puerto Rico, 1997-2001* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Fundación Sila M. Calderón, 2011), 140.

¹² Urban, "La Perla," 500.

through the steep coastal terrain. By the 1950s, the local slaughterhouse had closed, and many landowners tore down the *ranchóns*. More permanent single-family dwellings were built. Modeled after working-class homes in other parts of San Juan, they were often constructed out of existing foundations and standing walls, as well as recycled wood and non-permanent materials (figs. 4, 5).¹³

Although residents constructed and maintained homes, they had no claim to the land.

During this period, San Juan underwent

massive developments in the public and private housing sector. A visit to the city by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934, which included a tour of La Perla, resulted in the creation of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PPRA) by her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.¹⁴ The press coverage of her 1934 visit includes a visceral description of the unhygienic conditions of La Perla. The PPRA aimed to improve conditions by providing “permanent” reconstruction for the island through the systematic clearing of “slums,” which were then replaced with large scale housing projects. The PPRA’s focus on modern progress was furthered in 1959 when the newly autonomous Puerto Rican government enacted Operation Bootstrap. An initiative dedicated to modern development and agrarian reform on the island, the program facilitated a shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy. An urban plan for San Juan was developed and most informal settlements in San Juan proper were cleared and



Figure 5: View of a portion of the workers' quarter of La Perla from the old Spanish ramparts, 1938, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photo by Edwin Rosskam. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.

¹³ Urban, “La Perla,” 510; Caldieron, “Land Tenure,” 58.

¹⁴ Andrés Mignucci, “Modern urbanism in Puerto Rico: from abstract doctrines to concrete landscapes,” in *Espacios ambivalentes: historias y olvidos en la arquitectura social moderna*,” eds. Lizardi Pollock, Jorge L. and Martin Schwegmann (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2012), 134.

replaced with housing projects.¹⁵ This “externally oriented strategy” created social and economic conditions of high unemployment and large-scale migration that did little to raise the quality of life for individuals and families living on the island.¹⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, government agents and private developers proposed several unrealized plans to bulldoze La Perla.¹⁷ Urban attributes the failure of these developments to landowners’ refusal to sell, or simply to bureaucratic inefficiency.

By 1982, a beachfront road was constructed in La Perla to increase access to the area. Streetlights and infrastructure were installed, connecting the area to the city’s sewer system. However, most significant was the official transfer of land ownership from the heirs of factory owners to the inhabitants of the area, effectively legalizing La Perla as a community.¹⁸ Legal access to the land led to an increase in construction of permanent residences, while unstable structures by the coast were abandoned and bulldozed by the Housing Authority. This area is now the site of *El Bowl*. In a 2011 study of the area, architectural historian Jean M. Caldieron describes homes in La Perla that had been occupied for many generations as embodying a “flexible” design.¹⁹ The history of La Perla’s architecture—informal and in response to the needs and environment of its inhabitants—is reflected in the construction of Rosado-Seijo’s *El Bowl*.

The artist states that *El Bowl* was “...necessarily communal to build. It’s impossible to do this by myself.”²⁰ This construction process is key to understanding the work’s hybrid functionality. *El Bowl* grew out of personal necessity: Rosado-Seijo, a student at the nearby arts school in San Juan, needed a place to skateboard. After a failed test at a site nearby, the artist submitted a proposal to a local arts foundation to build a skate ramp on the coast, from which he received funds to begin work on his project. Supporting his vision were other local skateboarders who were also looking for a place to skate. A video documentary about *El Bowl* features an interview with co-collaborator Roberto “Boly” Cortez, who has been surfing and skating in San Juan since the 1970s. When Cortez first began working with Rosado-Seijo, the project was about skating. It later became a bigger endeavor than Cortez had initially imagined.

The coastal site where *El Bowl* was constructed was full of debris left over from a previous structure, possibly a pool. The artist moved to La Perla, and his presence in

¹⁵ Urban, “La Perla,” 506; Mignucci, “Modern urbanism,” 144.

¹⁶ James L. Dietz, *Puerto Rico: Negotiating Development and Change* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022), 66.

¹⁷ Mignucci, “Modern urbanism,” 135; Caldieron, “Land Tenure,” 56.

¹⁸ Urban, “La Perla,” 517. Construction of the beachfront road began in the 1970s; since this period, construction has been prohibited in the maritime zone of the neighborhood.

¹⁹ Caldieron, “Land Tenure,” 59.

²⁰ Chemi Rosado-Seijo interviewed by Daniel Rodriguez, April 21, 2018, video, 10:10.

the community and relationship with locals enabled him to overcome initial skepticism that he encountered in the community. Soon, residents from La Perla began to pitch in; research has confirmed the involvement of residents in improvement activities in La Perla.²¹ Construction began by amassing existing debris as a building material. Rosado-Seijo decided to use concrete in building the ramp, even though current methods for building improvised skate ramps commonly and primarily employ other materials, like wood. The work's location at the waterfront required the use of materials that could withstand the occasional flooding of seawater. The multi-functional shape of the pool also recalls the practice of skateboarders using abandoned swimming pools as ramps.

What Urban refers to as the historically "quasi-formal" character of La Perla is evident in Rosado-Seijo's project.²² The bowl itself is the product of collaborative manual labor and experimentation. In the beginning, Rosado-Seijo was attracted to La Perla because of its architectural legacy. He asserts that "the Bowl is a visual reference to the place where it has been constructed."²³ Reflecting on the process of building *El Bowl* over a decade later, the artist recalled how important it was for everyone involved to have a good sense of humor, as building the structure was based on a trial and error process.²⁴ The project was intended to showcase an alternative to professionalized architecture, drawing instead on the local architectural history of La Perla. For the artist, *El Bowl* was an "example of design that is also enjoyable, [and] fun to build."²⁵ Videos of its construction show a concrete mixer on the coastline. Some people are applying concrete as a final action to smooth out the concave surface, while nearby, a skateboarder is testing a completed section on his board. A comb has found its way into the exterior wall, representative of the everyday objects that one finds embedded in the structure. A small, narrow staircase leading to the entrance draws on the forms of staircases constructed along La Perla's steep slopes (fig. 6). Using existing debris as a building material references the construction methods of many La Perla homes, which often use local materials and are completed in multiple sections over time. Heaps of

²¹ Caldieron, "Land Tenure," 60. Caldieron's 2011 study asserts that 50% of residents participate in improvement activities in La Perla, a figure which may have decreased in recent decades given the rise of renters in the neighborhood, as descendants of original families have moved out (but have kept their family dwelling for rental income). In 2011, a large-scale drug raid of La Perla led to the incarceration of approximately one-fifth of the residents. A significant percentage of the current population are elderly and participate in activities offered by the community center, which is housed in the former slaughterhouse building.

²² Urban, "La Perla," 497.

²³ Chemi Rosado Seijo, "La Perla Bowl," video, 2015, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 3:30, <https://vimeo.com/138655930>.

²⁴ Chemi Rosado Seijo interviewed by Daniel Rodriguez, April 21, 2018, video, 10:44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:20.



Figure 6: *El Bowl*, 2018, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Detail of staircase. Photo by the author.

debris are covered with rebar, and then carefully smoothed over with concrete by the many hands involved in the project. The materials and form of the bowl, as well as its picturesque location at the water's edge, are doing what Simone calls "disturbing an image of something that may have otherwise been taken as 'for sure.'"²⁶ In this case, the longstanding local association of the neighborhood with poverty, high crime rates, and poor infrastructure is disrupted by an artist's interest in the neighborhood as a site of art-making, and his intention to gather community from both outside and inside of

²⁶ Simone, *The Surrounds*, 7.

La Perla's walls. The nature of *El Bowl's* "surrounds," its construction and use, points to the histories of the site and its participants.

After eight months of work, *El Bowl* opened in March 2006 and residents and skateboarders alike began enjoying their new recreation site for swimming or skating.²⁷ *El Bowl*, although envisioned and promoted by the artist, has expanded beyond his practice, and is used, maintained, and painted by members of the La Perla and skateboarding communities. The most widely documented instance of another artist working at the site was that of painter and public artist Federico Herrero in 2014. Herrero's practice often participates in public urban spaces, such as swimming pools, sidewalks, and playgrounds. Subsequent artistic interventions at *El Bowl* do not seem to be motivated by Rosado-Seijo, but arise more organically. Herrero's intervention in La Perla was to paint blocks of color on the interior of the structure, which emerged as a patchwork of rounded forms and colors. Once the bowl is filled with water, swimmers experience the patterns through reflections in the water as a shimmering collage of blues and greens.

Skateboarding as a Nomadic Practice

Rosado-Seijo's knowledge and interpretation of the history of skateboarding contributes to the forms and materials of *El Bowl*. Using an existing built space to skateboard is very much in the spirit of the sport. Gaining popularity in the 1960s and 70s, skateboards were used early on by surfers.²⁸ Skateboarders frequently make use of spaces like ramps and public squares, which means that the sport can be practiced in a wide variety of contexts. Abandoned and neglected spaces also often serve as potential skating surfaces.²⁹ *El Bowl* evolved from the artist's desire to translate his skateboarding practice into the creation of art objects and other socially engaged projects. Born in 1973 in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, Rosado-Seijo began the sport as a teenager, and continued to pursue his passion while earning his B.A. at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico. Skateboarding has continually informed his work and relationship to art history. In the summer of 2016, Rosado-Seijo installed his largest skate ramp at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Costa Rica, as part of the *History on Wheels* series. The wooden structure was later installed in a nearby

²⁷Chemi Rosado Seijo, "Art and the Urban Landscape," filmed December 2013 at Cranbrook Art Center, Bloomfield Hills, MI, video, 36:34.

²⁸Tara Winner, "Sidewalk Surfing: The Gnarly History of Skateboarding Part 1 (1940s to 1972)," *Museum of Play*. <https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/sidewalk-surfing-the-gnarly-history-of-skateboarding-part-i-1940s-to-1972/>.

²⁹Anastasiia Fedorova, "What Skateboarding Can Teach Us about Modern Life," *i-D Magazine*, October 8, 2016, [https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/gyg4z9/what-can-skateboarding-teach-us-about-modern-life](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/gyg4z9/what-can-skateboarding-teach-us-about-modern-life;); Seijo, "Art and the Urban Landscape," 31:42.

park.³⁰ More recently, in 2020 the artist installed *Ceremonial Pearl-Hole (The Ceremonial Bowl)* at Art Omi in Ghent, New York. The work, a concrete bowl for skateboarding, also incorporates the architectural form of a *batay*, a Taino ritual gathering space, reflecting the artist's interest in the ancient history of the island.³¹

Rosado-Seijo's continued use of the bowl form in his practice indicates a trend elucidated by Miwon Kwon. For Kwon, as more artists are commissioned to complete site-specific projects across the globe, their projects take on nomadic qualities of mobility and reproducibility. Kwon outlines that while some conceptual and minimalist artists defend their site-specific practices, "others are keen to undo the presumption of criticality associated with such principles as immobility, permanence, and unrepeatability."³² In this case, to re-present a site-oriented project across multiple locations, the presence of the artist has become a necessary performative aspect of this restaging. For Kwon, "rather than resisting mobilization, these artists are attempting to reinvent site specificity as a *nomadic* practice."³³ Reprising the bowl format at La Perla is an illustration of this portability. In the case of *El Bowl*, the structure indicates a unique instance within Rosado-Seijo's practice. Here, design is intended for and engages both local and global users, while still relying on the nomadic form of the skate bowl, which has developed into a form associated with the artist's practice, regardless of site.

Rosado-Seijo uses video to extend his nomadic skateboarding practice in *La Habana*, a project filmed over a period of seven days in Cuba during his participation in the 2015 Havana Biennial.³⁴ The artist attaches a camera to his board, which records his travel through the streets. The work has a consistent soundtrack: the grating of wheels against pavement, an occasional click or bump as the board encounters new surfaces, and the whoosh of Rosado-Seijo's leg propelling him forward. The viewer sees the environment of street surfaces, pedestrians' shoes, small children, and pets zoom by at board level. In these projects, Rosado-Seijo relies on the skateboard as a medium that is translocal; the rides he takes and the structures he builds are tied to a specific site, but the mobility of the form allows for its application across localities. Each use of the

³⁰ "Chemi Rosado-Seijo: One Thousand Four Hundred and Seventy One Rides," Press Release, Embajada Gallery, San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 28, 2017. This series also includes the treatment of skateboarding ramps as a canvas, the surfaces cross-hatched by the wheels, as well as a set of sculptures that takes the form of art history textbooks, re-fashioned to mimic the form of a skateboard.

³¹ *Batay* were also used as ball courts by the Taino, who have inhabited the island since c. 600 CE. For more on archeology of *batay* courts see Mike Toner, *Ghosts of the Taino*. Vol. 61 (New York, NY: Archaeological Institute of America, 2008).

³² Kwon, *One Place after Another*, 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁴ "One Thousand Four Hundred and Seventy-One Rides," *Terremoto*, July 26, 2017, <http://terremoto.mx/one-thousand-four-hundred-and-seventy-one-rides/>.

skateboard creates something that is new, but that is simultaneously inflected by the past through hints of its previous location, much like the remnants of the dirt from former rides accumulated on the wheels of a skateboard.

El Bowl has led to recognition of La Perla in local and global skateboarding communities. Unlike Rosado-Seijo's other projects, the site at La Perla was not intended to be de-installed following an art exhibition. Since Rosado-Seijo's initial involvement with local skaters in 2006, other skaters have traveled to *El Bowl*. The site has received coverage from a variety of international sports publications and has become a destination for skaters.³⁵ Professional skateboarders often bring towels to dry off the surface if it has been raining, or if *El Bowl* is still damp from the previous day's swimming.

However, the popularity of *El Bowl* has perpetuated generalizations about La Perla as an unsafe neighborhood. For instance, reporter Ron Whaley recounts his experience in the neighborhood in his 2015 article for *Transworld Skateboarding*. At one point, his companion quickly advises him to leave, as he notices a man carrying a gun.³⁶ This individual is actually a policeman on duty. This mischaracterization of La Perla persists, despite Rosado-Seijo and his collaborators' efforts to engage communities of skateboarders, artists, and residents.

Rosado-Seijo's engagement with La Perla is deepened through the *Festival de Chiringas*, a yearly kite festival in the neighborhood instituted by the artist and residents in 2014. The day is a celebration of La Perla, when handmade kites soar above the walls of San Juan. The artist's and skateboarders' involvement in this area contrast with government neglect. In speaking about the neighborhood, Gerardo "Junior" Ramírez, a community leader in La Perla, asserted that "neither the local or state government has helped us here, they haven't given us anything! Asking here, asking there, looking, looking... up until today we're still waiting for the help of the local municipality and the state."³⁷ *El Bowl* signaled an interest in the area that revitalized the community in ways the government could not provide.

³⁵ Ron Whaley, "KruX Puerto Rico Tour," *Transworld Skateboarding*, May 21, 2015, <https://skateboarding.transworld.net/photos/kruX-puerto-rico-tour/>. A Spanish-language YouTube channel dedicated to sports and travel uploaded a video of their visit to La Perla and *El Bowl*. The footage includes views of skateboarders using *El Bowl*. Aerial TV, "Skate Bowl Piscina y Skatepark en Puerto Rico," YouTube video, 10:21, April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1DzRM9OV04&t=245s>.

³⁶ Whaley, "KruX Puerto Rico Tour."

³⁷ Chemi Rosado Seijo, "La Perla Bowl," video, 2015, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 3:16, <https://vimeo.com/138655930>.

La Perla and Media Tourism in Puerto Rico

The need for government aid in marginalized areas of Puerto Rico has increased since Hurricane Maria made landfall on the island in September 2017. The damage to structures in La Perla was significant, due to the neighborhood's location on a steep oceanfront slope. Many houses were flooded, and a few collapsed completely, leaving people homeless; some had no choice but to sleep in the ruins. Currently only sixty percent of the population in La Perla hold the legal titles to their land.³⁸ Residents who lack official deeds to their property are not eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid from the United States government, leaving many at the mercy of whatever help they can get from their communities to reconstruct their lives. Signs posted near an entrance to the neighborhood following the hurricane read: "S.O.S., we need help. Water, provisions. Don't abandon us. Despacito." The latter is in reference to the hit reggaeton song, "Despacito" by Puerto Rican artists Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee. Ironically, that music video was filmed in La Perla earlier in 2016. The song's popularity inspired interest in the neighborhood, and some residents have started giving tours of areas depicted in the video, also providing visibility of the hurricane damage.

In the seven years since the release of "Despacito," La Perla has become subject to the overall displacement of Puerto Rican people. The movement of people out of the island has increased following the damage wrought by the hurricane in 2017, as well as due to the ongoing gentrification and commercialization of the island to cater to mainland U.S. Americans. This development has led to higher prices for housing and living necessities, which are out of reach for many Puerto Ricans.³⁹ (Minimum wage on the island was only raised past the federal rate of \$7.25 per hour in 2022.) The establishment of a federally appointed board to oversee repayment of the island's \$72 million debt, as well as tax incentives like Act 22, which provides mainlanders with a 100% tax exemption on capital gains, have exacerbated these growing inequities between mainland and island citizens. Enacted in 2012 by Governor Luis Fortuño to entice U.S. investors to relocate to Puerto Rico, Act 22 has since been expanded and further protected by later administrations like that of Governor Ricardo Roselló, who in 2019 solidified and expanded Act 22 to include broader incentives in a bill known as Act 60. Act 60 includes a consolidated tax code that provides huge deductions for mainland investors, and according to sociologist Jose Atilés, "establishes an efficient

³⁸ Caldieron, "Land Tenure," 61.

³⁹ Eighty-five percent of food in Puerto Rico is imported to the island at a high tax rate, contributing to exorbitant prices and food insecurity. See Shir Lerman Ginzburg, "Colonial Comida: The Colonization of Food Insecurity in Puerto Rico," *Food, Culture, & Society* 25, no. 1 (2022): 18–31.

process for granting tax exemptions to crypto-investors and corporations.”⁴⁰ While intended to improve economic and employment conditions on the island, the government is unable or unwilling to oversee and enforce aspects of the law, leading to huge revenue losses for the island.⁴¹ Act 60’s popularity among U.S. mainland-based hedge fund and crypto-currency managers have increased the island’s “visitor economy” as well. Act 60 beneficiaries are pricing out locals from real estate as short-term rentals proliferate (to qualify as a beneficiary of the law, one must reside for 183 days out of the year on the island). For Mariana Reyes Franco, curator at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, “it is evident that the only reason thousands of Act 22 beneficiaries have settled here is to enjoy the benefits of legal tax evasion facilitated by the continuation of the archipelago’s colonial status and our own disenfranchisement.”⁴² Advertisements by the government-owned Puerto Rico Tourist Company and social media posts by celebrities such as YouTube boxers Logan and Jake Paul that attempt to lure mainland investors to a tax-free, tropical island also contribute to the commodification and sensationalizing of Puerto Rican cultural spaces, including La Perla. While differing from the narrative of abject poverty promoted during first lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s visit to La Perla over eight decades ago, the prevailing narrative of U.S. hegemony over the Puerto Rican economy continues.

The visual vocabulary of the La Perla neighborhood has made appearances in other popular media referencing the island, including music videos by Bad Bunny. In 2023, the recognizable terrain of the neighborhood, including the graphic basketball courts of La Perla, were included in an advertisement for American Express featuring songwriter, actor, and playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda. These basketball courts were refurbished in 2010 by American former professional basketball player Carmelo Anthony. Completed a few years after the installation of *El Bowl*, the courts’ location at one of the entrances to La Perla through the colonial walls, with a scenic view of the Atlantic Ocean, has contributed to the neighborhood’s greater visibility and popularity. In the advertisement featuring Miranda, a celebrity who has come to stand for Puerto Rican culture within mainland U.S. popular culture, the representation of La Perla speaks to the neighborhood as a site at the intersection of class and politics. The product advertised, a credit card, is part of Miranda’s daydream of being in Puerto Rico, where he is shown walking the streets of the La Perla, and therefore authentically

⁴⁰ Jose Atilas, “The Paradise Performs: Blockchain, Cryptocurrencies, and the Puerto Rican Tax Haven,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (2022): 616.

⁴¹ Camacho, Cielo Naara Rios, “Lanzan campaña para derogar la Ley 22,” *Nueve Millones*, May 25, 2023 <https://9millones.com/es/organizations-unite-to-repeal-act-22/>.

⁴² Marina Reyes Franco, “Arts and Finances: Disinvesting in Puerto Rico,” in *No Existe Un Mundo Poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*, ed. Marcela Guerrero (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2022), 51.

connected to the community. The neighborhood, teeming with texture, color, and sound, acts as the epitome of Puerto Rican culture in music videos and advertisements. Miranda's presence in the space bolsters his identity as an authentic Puerto Rican artist. The advertisement participates in the long-term economic dependence of the island on the tourist industry, as the enticing sights and sounds of Miranda's daydream are meant to create a fantasy Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's colonial status is masked. Ironically, the marketing that relies so heavily on places like La Perla contributes to an economy that is participating in the demise of these neighborhoods and communities. Concurrent with the release of this advertisement, the popular staircase that provides access to La Perla through its basketball courts has been closed by the National Park Service (the agency oversees *El Morro*, the nearby colonial fortress) due to "severe damage,"⁴³ signaling the broader impulse of leadership on the island to control aspects of local culture after gaining commercial relevance.

Conclusion

The hybrid format of *El Bowl* allows skateboarders and La Perla residents alike to enjoy it, establishing a center that is intended to be self-sustaining and resonating with Simone's ideas of "the surrounds" as a "rehearsal for experimental ways of living."⁴⁴ The artist's continued engagement with skateboarding culture across the globe marks the form as a nomadic practice, yet the materials and construction of the work tie *El Bowl* to its site. During weekends in La Perla, *El Bowl* is one of the few public swimming pools in the area, while during the week it provides a needed space for skateboarding. Skateboarders may be locals or tourists, but their skating has contributed to the tourist popularity and promotion of La Perla, relating to the unstable character of "the surrounds." Within increasingly commercialized spaces in media culture representing the island, art works and installations grounded in social practice also carry the risk to be overtaken by their market appeal. *El Bowl* recognizes and pays homage to the history and forms of community life in La Perla, while also inadvertently conversing with colonial infrastructures and policies on the island that might ultimately contribute to the tourist commodification of such sites in manner that places their ability to serve the communities they were intended for at risk.

⁴³ "Cierran escalera hacia La Perla por 'daños severos,'" *El Calce*, August 29, 2023, <https://www.elcalce.com/contexto/2023/08/29/cierran-escalera-hacia-la-perla-por-danos-severos/>.

⁴⁴ Simone, *The Surrounds*, 6.

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