Casitas
Place and Culture

Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios

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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 alternative landscapes. On 142nd Street, and throughout the South Bronx, East Harlem (el Barrio), the Lower East Side (Loisaida) and Brooklyn, *casitas* stand as eponymous metaphors of place and culture.1

*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.2

Casa built in New York save 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”3 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 pressures.

At the same time, massive dislocations impacted working-class neighborhoods throughout New York, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of homes. Not all neighborhoods fared equally. Some became surges with diminished value to the financial hub, el Barrio, for example, lost close to one third of its structures. Others,
like Loisaida, experiences gentrification. Still others became places of arrival for new immigrants, perhaps becoming a new or reconfigured borderland. These high-safety 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, “Bustvilles” and squat; alternative, informal landscapes of the post-industrial city.

The losses, of course, were not only of buildings and people’s homes, but also of primary life-spaces, places in which people’s “dreams were made and their lives unfolded.” This signalled the detachment of a people from their most recent history, their memories, as memoria, rendering them invisible and making them guests in the neighborhoods to which they were forcibly relocated. The decline and loss of institutions, bodega, 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.

Thus a new 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 “ideal 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.

Paradoxically, in cyber-city, the city ostensibly with no spatial needs, the virtual electronic city of computers and moderns 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 Jaram and...
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. 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 communities; their will to reshape is tempered by meager resources and recent history. Their language is one of circumscribed impact, where holding ground, turf, reses tar, 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.8

The Puerto Rican Experience: From Bodegas to Casitas

Since arriving in New York early in this century, Puerto Ricans have defied severe housing problems, 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 determinitization" of a whole community.6 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.

By choosing names like Villa Puerto Rico, El Jaranbal, Aboronzas de Pitrí, and Rincon Criollo, casitas builders introduce and defend the possibility of place, both physical and metaphorical. The practice of building casitas imparts identity to the urban landscape by recusing images, resuscita imagen, and by adding to the power of other places everybody recognizes, feels good towards and can identify with.

Building casita is an act that both affirms the
power of culture in space and offers resistance to further determinitalization. Caitea 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-gratae, at worst, and where unifying and inclusive images of the urban narrative seem to be fading daily.89

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

The commuting airplane has been an agent linking contiguous social milieus, Puerto Rico and New 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, caita builders, when introducing the caita language to New 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 caitas on the streets of New York, something threatening to many people who may otherwise live in relative security. The abiding message of the caita 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. Caitea 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.”90

Popular Dwelling and Changing Urban Landscapes

Caitea 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 (bohí), and the Africans, who gave the bohí its final configuration in the plantation hut. Caitea 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.92

Before Columbus arrived in the Caribbe, Puerto Rico was called Boriken and was home to the Taíno, descendants of Arawak cultures. The Taíno lived in yuca-yuques, nucleations whose principal structures were the amey, the antiguas’s home, and the bohí. Yuca-yuques were organized around a central open plaza, the bany.

Between 1500, 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 10,000 people were conquered and permanently displaced. The Spanish destroyed all yuca-yuques and resettled the people of Puerto Rico into encomenderos (medieval institutions that were reconstituted 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. Bohíos and a reconstrued bany 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. Bohíos and banyes...
became foundations of a Puerto Rican vernacular that expressed its dual parentage: the Taino and the African.

Between 1535 and 1810 the mitayos, or cross-breeding, of the Taino, 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 (henequén), was isolated and severely limited by the island's mountainous topography. Hausas 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 undorned plaza, often no more than a clearing, at the center. The plaza was surrounded by symbols of European power — church and adobe — religious and civil government buildings that formed the core of the newer civic life. The plaza was also where informal markets and religious festivities occurred. It mediated between the town and its hinterland, while testifying 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 bohío of the jibaro, or rural peasants, and the casas of the townpeople, 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. Bohíos 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 bohío varied in relation to the owner's social position; those of slaves and the landless, agredos, were possibly the most rustic and least evolved from the original Taino dwelling.

One pictorial record of this differentiation is found in El Villorico, a painting made in 1894 by the Puerto Rican artist Francisco Oller. El Villorico depicts a peasant child's wake, a jibaro celebration emulating a Bautista, a traditional African ritual.

The site of the celebration is set in a large public place, such as a church or a plaza, but a jibaro's home — which comprises a bohío, a small, rustic, single-room hut, and, possibly, an outside room, the uryo.

The bohío depicted in the painting has a wooden floor isolating the structure from the terrain, protecting it from the elements, a significant improvement over early Taino 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 bohío 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 bohío in El Villorico had become a new structure, an emerging vernacular combining cultural elements from three sources: from the Taino, 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 jibaro, their isolation on their farms was a centripetal force that bonded them to their land and neighbors. Events like that depicted in El Villorico provided social and cultural bonding in the most important of the ordinary landscapes of his period: the rural bohío and the buena, suggesting poverty as well as independence.
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 alturas, or highlands. Meanwhile, in the bajíos, or lowlands, the expanding sugar economy resulted in the construction of sugar factories, or centrales. These compounds enabled the production of 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 casita, 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 bajíos, before long, many of the new arrivals became surplus labor as the new economy could not absorb them. By the 1920s, most were compelled to migrate once again, this time to the island's urban nucleiations. 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 1930s a second wave of industrialization transformed the island's economy. The introduction of urbanization, tract suburban housing,
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 cañita) 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, cañitas acquired a new status in the island’s lore. They became part of the narrative that recollected 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 cañitas were implanted in their collective memory as emblems of the old world, a “fantastized paradise” they left behind. These images collapsed ecological, social and built landscapes into a new symbolic architectural language.

To those who remained on the island, cañitas became repositories of tradition, modulating change while assuring permanence and the transmission of a legacy. When Invicta Plaza de Cabo Rojo, a very old town en Puerto Rico’s southern coast, I found an antique 1930 cañita 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
culture, and that when townsfolk were identifying a “universal symbol” of Puerto Rican culture from the earlier part of the century, the casitas won by acclamation. They found use and rebuilt it in the middle of the town plaza.

Casetas 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 urbanization as well as in 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 Jarón, 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.


1. These areas include all Caribbean islands; the (cont.) southern and Gulf states in the U.S.; and the Caribbean-facing areas of South and Central America.


Zekis, Callejones, and El Espacioso: Conquista, is the cataloger for the exhibit, La Casa de Teke Navarro, by artist Antonio Martor (New York: Museo del Barrio, 1993).

