

Soldiers and Tourists:

The Subjective Selves of Puerto Rico's Modern Architecture

by Miguel Rodríguez Casellas

Jardín Alado, Charles Juhasz in Guayama,
Puerto Rico, Photo: Kenneth Rexach

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Exhibition: Henry Klumb and
Poetic Exuberance in Architecture.
Photo: Puerto Rico Museum of Art

I. History as void

History is a commodity in Puerto Rican culture. It dictates social hierarchies as it exercises its hegemonic power to produce value. To claim one's own history as a possession is not only a triumph in itself—that of being able to trace one's life back to an advantageous point of origin—but also an authorization to distribute it as a brand. To survive the historical enquiry without having to acknowledge shameful events or dirty family secrets is a privilege. Those who manage to connect their past to a deified historical account showcase their history as a precious commodity, a convenient escape from the Island's vulgarity, and a priceless identity passport that could lead to first-world alliances in spite of the prevailing third world conditions.

Still, most personal histories come in less than perfect packages, and in that sense it is often preferable to forget and redo the past, surveying for new facts that may be stacked over each other in strategic ways. In these historical makeovers the selection of the right mnemonic devices is as important as the connections between them, as is the case with any good piece of narrative. The facts, isolated from a consensual historic context, are accumulated like hardware store inventory, a kit of parts ready for artifactual assemblage.

Modern Architecture in Puerto Rico has functioned as a pseudo-mnemonic machine since its very first insertions into the Island's imagination. A tainted past provided the raw material for a new manufactured memory. To begin again, to forget what was left from previous colonial enterprises, to reconfigure the immediate past as a sign of the future, to overcome tropical disease for tropical pleasure, all these defined the agenda of Puerto Rican Modern Architecture.

Although many connections could be drawn to the European models that claimed a similar emancipation from the past, or to the Brazilian chapter of Modern Architecture that sought to build the promise of a future that was yet to occur, there is something rather



unique about the Puerto Rican Modernist tradition. To begin with, the players were quite different. On that aspect, I would argue that the local Government was not the intellectual author of the modern agenda, a role that is so often hyperbolized in many historical accounts. I would argue, instead, that it was the conspicuous alliance of the military and hotel industry that best approximated the role of author. I would even say that their actions transcended the actual implantation of the modernist tabula rasa, but that they erased memory as much as they produced it, and that it was in these exchanges and negotiations of fact and fantasy that the Modern Movement took place in the island.

After all the discussions on the spatial qualities of the Puerto Rican Modern tradition, I prefer to look at the "imagination" as the targeted space of this architectural body. Architectural forms are no more than props for a super production of fictions and dreams.

Today, I will argue that modern architecture played a major role in reconfiguring a collective memory of sorts, and that its interest was equally divided between an ideological break with the past and the manufacturing of a "new past": a brand new history.

Back in 1955, when the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture was created as part of a state initiative to decriminalize Puerto Rican symbols that were strictly forbidden before the creation of the Estado Libre Asociado — roughly translated as "Commonwealth" — a sanitizing operation that folklorized the remains of a very selective memory was set in motion. A sentimental storytelling approach took over what should have been a rigorous

historical account, and myths such as the organic fusion of races leading to "puertorriqueñidad" became part of both the state's official discourse and the self-identity of every man and woman. Left behind were the nasty episodes of slavery and domination, as has been the norm in other Caribbean countries and in the American South, places that have been periodically reinvented with a rather flexible imagination. To mitigate with myth what is too painful to acknowledge as history grew to be the standard approach among the cultural technocrats that took the mission of rewriting the past for a furiously modern and contemporary Puerto Rican audience in the second half of the 20th century.

Almost everybody agreed with the appearance of this brand new version of history. And in time, few remembered the rumors and marginal accounts from which it was constructed. Modern architecture helped us forget.

As one becomes familiarized with the falsification and lies that pollute the popular imagination, one becomes aware that in essence, there is no history in Puerto Rico, but a monumental void. An amnesic realm of faux memories and mystification lies at the place where a contradictory, yet dynamic historical account should have been. This void space is so charged with ideology and repression that one could experience regular attacks of paranoid fear while engaging in the tremendously criminal act of articulating a new interpretation of the abject historical body.

Ignited by this problematic void, a fetishistic compulsion toward collecting historical facts deters serious analysis. Information is taxonomized before it is scrutinized. The modern masters are created before one gets the opportunity to cross-examine them with their flaws and shortcomings. It is a "don't touch the relic" policy that has ended up dominating the tone of discussion of Modern Architecture in Puerto Rico. If Manfredo Tafuri notoriously claimed the absence of history in the era of criticism, I would have to say

that in Puerto Rican architectural discourse there is neither history nor criticism when addressing Modern Architecture.

Nevertheless, there is a positive side to this monumental void, namely the fertile ground it provides for speculative and counterfactual thought. This mental positioning could foster a more prolific narrative vehicle for criticism than the patrimonial celebration of the architectural past that has been the norm when addressing both colonial and modern architecture in Puerto Rico.

Modern Architecture in Puerto Rico is a fascinating case study of myth-making and ideological co-opting. The rights over its narrative have become a battleground for generational misunderstandings and gremial conflict. On one side we find the late modernists that never recovered from the religious proclivities of the Modern Movement's discourse, meaning the mixture of philanthropy and science as positive instruments of social reform. Those who were part of the Modern Movement's last chapters are now revered as "paternal figures" in the typical fashion of the modernist master. Criticism is seen as an act of treason against their canonic body of work and against their very noble goals, and it could also be taken as an offensive attack on the Puerto Rican identity itself. This is because in recent years Modern Architecture has been galvanized to Puerto Rican identity, with its so-called adaptations to the tropical weather praised as the foundational signs of the Puerto Rican self. I will address that concept later on today.

In another corner one finds the baby boomers, the ones who once embraced postmodernism and its commodification of history as a valid form-making approach. For those who had seen their stylistic choices ridiculed by an ever-changing architectural value media machine, acknowledging the qualities of modern architecture in the island became an acto de contrición, a mea culpa of sorts that provided them with the opportunity to refresh their presence and relevance as contemporary architects with a language of readily enforceable compositional strategies and ready-to-wear modern garments.

A third group is morally divided between their vintage appreciation of the modern architectural syntax and their urgency to position themselves apart

from the reigning baby boomers. The members of this group claim to be the real "contemporaries," and to prove so, they systematically erase every trace of modern architecture from the descriptions of their work, because they consider it too historical, although the formal debts remain more than obvious. A co-opted language of neurosciences and pulp science fiction dominates their rhetoric, while their designs embrace a wide range of modern formal antics. All this sounds like a collection of carry rivalries and inconsequential gossip, but it is at the core of the prevailing confusions and fantasyland storytelling that color the discussion of Puerto Rico's modern legacy.

I will not try to fill the historical void with yet another spanking new narrative nor align myself with any of the protagonists of the local architects' family feud. Instead, I want to take this opportunity to share an alternative reading of what seems to be the most important architectural body of work in 20th century Puerto Rico. In essence, I am fascinated by the complex ideological strategies that such simple architecture has been able to carry on.

II. Tropical disease + Tropical ecstasy = Sick Building Syndrome

A common misconception in most historical accounts of Puerto Rican Modern Architecture is the so-called adaptation of previous models to the tropical weather. In addition to keeping in line with the prevailing evolutionary approach that is often used when periodizing the origin of Caribbean cultures, the narrative of "transforming" European and American precedents enforces a rhetoric of "identity search in architecture" that adds a metaphysical dimension to the practical adjustments that were implemented. While this interpretation benefits the local neo-national urges to add new entries to the "identity catalogue of signs," it is unsustainable when measured against the



larger picture of modernist discourse.

The practical reconfigurations of the modern syntax, in their transit from the North to the Tropic of Cancer, should not be called "adaptations" but "dis-adaptations." The stripping down of glass and the removal of superfluous insulating layers was very easily executed when transferring the European/American model to Puerto Rico.

In Europe and in the United States, modern architecture did not come about with such ease. There, the European/American architect had to work arduously to adapt the modern open boxes to harsh weather and conditions that resist the very notion of integrating inside and outside. They are the ones who were out of place when attempting to produce the modern edifice.

The conceptual presence of a benign weather in modern ideology is older than modern architecture itself, because it is a fact that a modern man was walking on Earth long before he was able to live in a modern house.

The origin of a modern subjectivity, commonly associated with the machine operator, the engineer, or even the enlightened scientist who symbolized "action," could also be related to the naked classical body, and I mean literally naked here. It was Quatremère de Quincy who fantasized about a naked Greco-Roman body whose privileged exposure to a warmer weather led to a closer contact with nature, the source of all truth. It is an Enlightenment idea to connect the classical body, which is a pleasure to watch, to the scientist that designs the watching devices. Modern subjectivity is at the intersection of both figures, the naked guy and the well-dressed scientist, but it was the house of the former — not the laboratory of the latter — that stole the imagination of modern architects.

The modern house is an open house, transparent and defiant of a natural world in which the weather forecast is eternally optimistic, allowing for the agile movements of the nude Greco-Roman body. Glass became a necessity in northern climates, a means to achieve a symbolic transparency when a literal one was impossible. For those architects who brought to the Island the formal dialogues of Modernity, the tropical weather opened up the opportunity to strip down the building of unnecessary clothing, therefore restoring the presence of the original

naked body for a brand new Classical Era of technological progress and scientific knowledge.

Modern Architecture felt at home in Puerto Rico, and that was not a historical coincidence. Notions of a rational architecture, so deeply rooted in modern ideology, were often defended by deploying “primitive huts” in French Caribbean settings as evidence. Here again, the scientist mated with what he considered to be a native body, and it should be pointed out that this body was as mystified during the Enlightenment as was the other naked body, the classical one. Increasingly, both creatures became indistinguishable from each other while the European gaze gained a distinct recognizability with respect to any previous form of looking. A rational architecture was developed upon the honesty and ingenuity of the naked builder who was closely watched by his European molester.

To bring back the European man to the Caribbean, (or the American-trained architect that gained in school the gravitas of the colonial ruler), is to bring back the notion of the Caribbean as a Laboratory of Modernity, a la Frezier, but it is also the consummation of a hidden desire to escape from the very rigidities of rational thought into the playful and informal vastness of modern space. A Garden of Eden in the Caribbean, so to speak, is as much an attack to western culture and civilization, by repositioning the classical model in an older, primordial setting, as it is a confirmation of the positivistic notion that science can release us from time and space constraints.

In the long run, the consequences of such openness proved to be disastrous in most modern buildings in the Tropics. The impetus to erase the marks of a previously pathologized jungle, full of sickening air and tropical disease, led to an over-romantization of the weather in spite of form, and even more traumatically, in spite of function, the ultimate modern sin. One of the biggest challenges of restoring modern architecture in Puerto Rico is the legacy of sick building syndrome, courtesy of the air conditioning devices brought in once the idealized wind and humidity interfered with the buildings' operations.

When restoring those structures, one cannot go back to the previous openness. In dis-adapting the building to the benign tropical weather, the modern architects brought trouble to paradise. By



celebrating modern architecture as cure, they underestimated nature. But even today, those shortcomings are often overlooked, as it is preferred to emphasize the integration of traditional environmental control techniques with the foreign language of modernity. Once again, the idea of reconciling past and present as a fortunate marriage that procreated national identity is impeding a critical examination of the facts.

To look at Puerto Rican Modern Architecture as the maternity warden of an infantile national identity, removing any references to the theoretical frameworks of western architecture, for the purpose of overemphasizing the unique as “vernacular,” has led us to ignore the complex ideological operations that have handled the national unconscious as a design project. Perhaps a more violent account needs to be brought forward, to prove that what once looked like paradise was in fact an open battleground of selves.

III. The war machine

There is no need to escape the fact that the Caribbean has been a militarized region since Europe directed its gaze towards it, and even before then. The name itself carries the memories of those violent Caribs whose love of war is well documented. The architecture of science, the rubric that would lead to Modern Architecture, was already in place in the careful diagramming of colonial towns and in the monumental architecture of fortresses and fortifications implanted by the Spaniards. Science and war were mutually indispensable even before science was acknowledged as a meaningful word. Since colonial times, the systematization of war into building construction and city planning has been as much an instrument of domination as a sign of the instrument itself. It was an ancient roman strategy of control that the Renaissance's subjectivity reenacted in the New World. The Caribbean would be the perfect barbaric landscape for the proliferation of discipline and order, war

and science.

It is not surprising then, to see how much the concept of war is symbolically embedded in the tissues of Caribbean culture. Puerto Rico is no exception to the rule. From Benítez Rojo's archipelagic defensive machine to Felix Jiménez's theory of the American soldier as a model of masculinity for the squalid, colonized, emasculated Puerto Rican man, both land and body have been cast in this region for and by war.

Desire provided the threshold, the vulnerable entry for the invasion and propagation of the war machine. History here takes the form of an erotic tale of force and submission, played by the military superpower and the curious victim, because it has to be acknowledged for good that the Puerto Rican victim of imperialism and military coercion has been, and still is, a very curious victim. The desire to be taken by the powerful other coexists with the fear of rejection and an increasing sense of guilt. It is not always possible to accept at a conscious level the amount of pleasure that is derived from the titanic intervention of American military power on the island. The unconscious is something else.

Modern Architecture allowed for an unconscious pleasure to be openly acknowledged and enjoyed. It helped demilitarize the military by aestheticizing every territorial decision and every reconfiguration in space. Space renders desire, a desire to be touched by the powerful one, a desire to be organized under his will.

In modern ideology the ultimate ruler is Science, and the power it unleashes is called modernization. In Puerto Rico this process was further gentilized with the term Americanization, and this brought a level of role-playing to space transformation that led directly to the concept of war.

Military bases became the showcase of modernity long before the Modern Movement was consolidated as such at the dawn of the historical Avant-Gardes. For a hungry population denied of the large scales and grandeur of 19th



century architecture, military bases conjured the aesthetic of modernity as large-size beautification. Military bases became in Puerto Rico the equivalent to the 19th century's City Beautiful Movement.

The aesthetic qualities and configurations of military bases were put in place as a scale model for what the island should become under American Rule. If the advertised presence of the athletic body and well-fed soldier, using Félix Jiménez's remark, was a way of relabeling our national masculinity as weak and hypertrophic, military bases performed an analogous function with respect to the territory. They not only forced the unreasonable comparison that led to self-hate and an inferiority complex, but also carried the cure, the redemptive power to help us overcome our national failures.

The popularization of the military base's form and way of life is still a driving force in the Puerto Rican imaginary self. One could claim that over the course of a century the island has been reconfigured with the military base as a model. The idea of the enclave, with fences and surveilled access that guarantee security; with pure, hurricane-resistant, concrete structures; with clear-cut separations of functions and specialized typologies that cater to both essential needs and entertainment; with ideal pastures that erased the memory of the sugar cane field of exploitation with green grasses of contemplation, all within the best medical care and education available, became the model of what the country wanted to become. It is my belief that in spite of the geopolitical logic that brought the military bases to the island, it was their local role as advertisers of Modernization/Americanization what kept them in place.

The increasingly complex highway system facilitated the dissemination of the military ideal across the territory, a system that was built with federal funds as part of a strategy for connecting each of the military enclaves into a war system. The old train infrastructure that served the sugar cane industry was methodically substituted by the automobile speedways that would add personal mobility to the wish list of modern desires. If looking at the military bases was an opportunity to dream oneself in them, and if looking at the soldier was a way of wanting to become him, then looking at space from the car's perspective turned the entire island into a visual field of desire.

An undeclared desire to escape from oneself into the domain of the

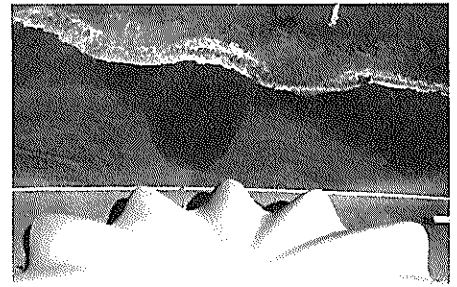
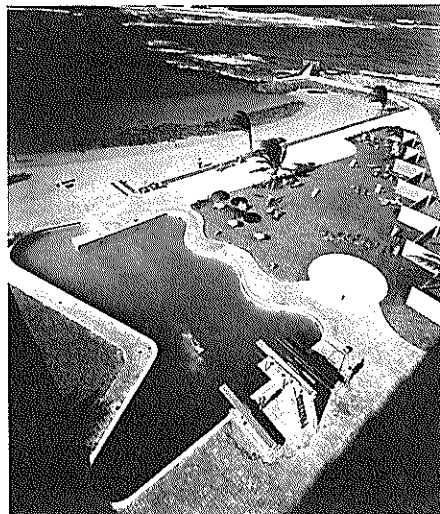
"powerful one" turned out to be a strong cultural force in Puerto Rico from the early decades of the 20th century. Modern Architecture was the way to conceptually achieve the physical displacement that was not available to everybody. If one could not always escape the island, the island could be made so foreign from itself that it would stand in for the desired other. In that sense, the modernist *tabula rasa* became a self-inflicted act of mutilation.

To recognize oneself in the unrecognizable landscape of the future articulated the ultimate escape from an aborted history.

IV. Landscapes of leisure

In the last-minute consolidation of Puerto Rican identity there were moments of intensity as well as were weak ones. If food, dance and music are regarded as providers of short cut routes to a sense of national realization and belonging, design is often perceived as a rather underdeveloped area in providing the props and backgrounds to the local identity spectacle. Colonial and 19th century architecture are so well-rooted in the national imagination that their status as design artifacts is not even necessary for bringing out their symbolic capabilities. Modern design, on the contrary, is so connected to the idea of a designer's will that its eventual validation as a carrier of national identity struggles with the very idea of the narcissistic modern architect. It is no coincidence that the little historiography that has been done on this type of architecture almost always relates the designers to a larger, collective, national project. One could reconstruct the logic behind this pervasive narrative format.

The status of the designer as author, if exaggerated, could undermine



the collectivization of the work as part of a national product or legacy. On the other hand, by praising the author's genius, the road suddenly becomes free of obstacle for conferring patrimonial status to his architecture, a mystified sphere that benefits from any acknowledgement of patriarchal enhancements. This tension between the celebration of modern architecture as a collective, national achievement, and the modern architect as an autonomous, individual genius, is a very recent phenomenon in local debates. With the creation of a local chapter of DOCOMOMO in Puerto Rico, a louder, vibrant conversation about these conflicts is starting to emerge. At this point, one could only hope for the best.

However, there is not much hope left in Puerto Rico these days, in general. The current economic slowdown and the unanimous sense of anticlimactic momentum, of Puerto Rico as a "has-been country," of the incomplete national project that did not grow up to its expectation, is forcing oblique views of the legacies of the 20th century. Most of the time, these visual confrontations with the past are about the "what went wrong" and the "when was the last time that hope was a collective, shared sentiment?" As a result of this introspective mood, Modern Architecture is gaining a sudden visibility, that of the coherent sign of a golden era. Here again, romance is in the air, and its distorting effects have to be expected.

This sudden interest in Modern Architecture in Puerto Rico is a result of an overflow of national anxiety. The specificities of the modern project in the island, as a place controlled by mental constructions, are now more important to look at than its formal qualities, as I have stated previously. And a very first observation that arises from the realm of the imagination is that modern architectural projects were not uniformly absorbed into the national consciousness. While government buildings that serve the population have tended to share a history of distopic decline, there is an architectural



type that has retained its symbolic power—and the utopic clairvoyance of the original photographs—over any other architectural type, and I am referring here to the hotel, both the building and its image.

The mid-century hotel extended the modern artifactuality to the landscape in ways that are not entirely foreign to the early military bases. In a way, they are the result of the ongoing military operation that reconfigured the island toward American interests. Once the soldier cleaned up the jungle, a landscaped facsimile was scheduled to occur.

But going back to the previous comment on the weak spots of identity, one should mention here the chronic absence of an acknowledged landscape tradition in Puerto Rico. There are many possible explanations for this omission. The general sense toward the land is very much the result of previous agricultural latifundia and its collateral perception of land as being a feudal commodity that is foreign to those who live and work on it. There is a subjacent demonization of nature in Puerto Rican culture that portrays it as a source of either disease or exploitation; both associations are rooted in history and they have evolved into a national aesthetic that celebrates what is obviously artificial and therefore safer.

When the massive suburbanization of the territory left patches of land under the titularity of the new middle-class home owner, it was surprising to see their consistent disdain of the garden as an integral part of the house. Here and there, a little mnemonic garden, with its disorganized array of fruit trees and medicinal plants, might bring back the memory of a romantized, lost original farm. But even in those particular moments, the garden is no more than a place of neglect, the haven of provisional decisions that ended up rooting themselves in the ground without a designer's will. To act on the territory is, once again, the realm

of the colonial ruler, whose violent force is both feared as it is perversely desired.

Modern hotels are places where a symbolic communion between the subordinator and the subordinated is depicted as natural, free from the obscene undertones of a repressive self. Its referential value was immensely needed in the second half of the 20th century, when the brutal effect of living a late industrialization—and the abrupt social reorganization it required—coincided with the experience of a postindustrial pathos and the social crisis that is typical of a consumers' culture. The democratization of pleasure, which lies at the core of the Modern Movement's promise, was already put in question in the dysfunctional public housing projects that tried to discipline the population and in the anxieties that the modern city was cultivating throughout the island. The tourist, then, became a sublimized role for Puerto Ricans to escape from the old and now chronically exacerbated sense of displacement, into the secure, though provisional status of the amused observer. Natural beauty, free from diseases or forced labor associations, would be enjoyed from the "watching devices," strategic standpoints and perspectival frames implemented by Modern Architecture. To look at nature, finally being able to enjoy its presence without having to renounce to the comforts of modern architecture, is part of the experience Puerto Ricans allow themselves to have while playing tourist at the resort hotel.

In the new mid-century hotels, the original lawns that once were an integral part of the military base's aesthetic were eventually transformed into jungle-like Eden. Instant gardening brought a natural, pseudo-historic setting to the standardized modern container. The aging effect achieved by the use of landscape design dignified the modern hotel building, giving it an essential, transcendental quality through the combined ages of plants and trees that conveyed a sense of history with their size and mature development.

While the rest of the island seemed to be transforming itself using the military base as a model and formal synthesis of collective aspirations, hotels often attained the status of sanctuaries of timeless, yet predictable, perfection. In spite of class differences, hotels systematized for everybody the act of escaping from the island. With every new visit, a renewed faith in the promises of modern architecture was

secured, even as modern architecture in the rest of the island faced decay and neglect.

The hotels' large maintenance budget allowed them to survive wear and abuse with grace. As places for forgetting and reinventing memories, hotels were extremely successful because of their utopic superiority. It is not surprising to corroborate in official statistical reports that the most important segment of the tourist industry in Puerto Rico are Puerto Ricans themselves, both the ones who live on the island and those who fled decades ago.

Hotel lingering is a national pastime; a new country is recreated with each visit through a memory exchange operation. Modern Architecture in Puerto Rico found in hotels a niche to preserve its best features, like an exposed counterpart to the hidden Dorian Grey picture.

It is not an exaggeration to say that modern hotels are the most symbolically loaded architecture of the island and that their role was to ease down the collateral dissatisfaction left by the Modern Movement.

In an era where local encoded messages are overpowered by unscripted global rubrics, the symbolic status of architecture is put in question. For a contemporary architect, as I would like to consider myself to be, the unfolding of historical subjectivities that previously remained undocumented and tacit is no amusing archeological game or fetishistic obsession, but a way to confront the centuries-old Caribbean dependency on the epistemologies and formal models of the powerful. To accept the present without asking questions has often been a safe political move in this part of the world. This positioning is no longer advantageous, because today's subjectivities, more than ever before, seem haunted by histories whose authenticity is no longer a relevant issue, as long as their effects are real, here and now.

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Historical Images taken from,
Fotografías para la Historia de Puerto Rico
1844-1952, Ediciones Huracán

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top: *Hotel La Concha* in San Juan, Puerto Rico
Photo: Ivonne M. Marcial
bottom: *Hotel Caribe* Hilton in San Juan, Puerto Rico
Photo: Ezra Stoller / Private Collection José J. Toro

Hotel Cerromar in Dorado, Puerto Rico
Photo: Miguel Rodríguez Casellas

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