Casitas
Place and Culture

Appropriating Place
in Puerto Rican Barrios
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, outdoor stands as evocative metaphors of place and culture. 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. Casitas built in New York serve 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” enclosures, 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” 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-poor 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-visibility 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, “Illusvilles” and auñito; alternative, informal landscapes of the post-industrial city.

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

These transformations have led to sharper contrasts in the everyday spaces of New York, a divergence in the quality of life among various neighborhoods, perhaps greater than ever before, and the rise of a unique form of an American urban apartheid. “Fortress cities” brutally divided into “fortified cells of affluence” and “places of terror” where police battle the criminalized poor. As class polarization increases, there is an increasing inequality in different populations’ ability to choose where to build and appropriate place, the foundation of their identity as people in a neighborhood.3

Thus, auñitos 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 “trivial imagery of post-industrial landscapes like Silicon Valley, i.e., ecology, leisure and livability.” 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.6

Paradoxically, in cyber-city, the city ostensibly with no spatial needs, the virtual electronic city of computers and modern 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 Jarman 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, rescatar, takes on the primary role, a true architecture of resistance subverting the traditional city." The casita, like the ubiquitous Puerto Rican flag, becomes a vehicle through which their builders articulate and defend their national identity, their imagined community, their innate essence, who they are.8

The Puerto Rican Experience: From Bodegas to Casitas

Since arriving in New York early in this century, Puerto Ricans have faced 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 determinantalization" of a whole community.9 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.9

By choosing names like Villa Puerto Rico, El Jaranal, Aboranzas de M. Patris and Rincón 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 rescuing images, rescatabilizando imagen, and by attributing to the power of other places everybody recognizes, feels good toward and can identify with.

Building casitas is an act that both affirms the
power of culture in space and offers resistance to further deterioralization. Caite are become place to displaced people, new "urban bedrooms" removed from other places. Perhaps they also become new invented traditions, new segregated public areas 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 persona-non-grata, at worst, and where unifying and inclusive images of the urban narrative seem to be fading daily.94

Puerto Rican migration patterns have been fundamental to the development of caites. As colonial citizens of the U.S., Puerto Ricans circulate freely between two spaces, colony and metropolis, thus circumventing barriers traditionally associated with borders, or fronteras. This condition has provided several generations ongoing contact with fresh images of the same 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 shady area in San Juan, are more closely connected, culturally, than East Harlem and Battery Park City. Hence, caite builders, when introducing the caite 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 of the language of Third World, facéados, squatte’s shanties, arribadores or villas miserias.

There is something ominous about the presence of caites on the streets of New York, something threatening to many people who may otherwise live in relative security. The abiding message of the caite is one of shelter, a squatte’s metaphor many find disturbing, particularly in the increasing presence of the wandering homeless in the most advanced and richest urban centers in the world. Caite signal that the visual discourse of facéados, arribadores, comunidades marginales — 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."95

Popular Dwelling and Changing Urban Landscapes

Caite 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 (bobo), and the Africans, who gave the bobo its final configuration in the plantation hut. Caite 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.12

Before Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico was called Boriken and was home to the Taínos, descendants of Arawak cultures. The Taínos lived in yacoques, nucleations whose principal structures were the aro (the arôte’s home), and the bobo. Yacoques were organized around a central open plaza, the hato.

Between 1500, with the founding of Caparra, the first European settlement in Puerto Rico, and 1551, when the conquest of the continent began, between 5,000 to 70,000 people were conquered and permanently displaced. The Spanish destroyed all yacoques and resettled people of Puerto Rico into encomiendas (medieval institutions that were recreated as compounds for the purpose of colonization), where they were enslaved to mine for gold. The attendant loss of place and identity contributed to the eventual eradication of the Taíno.

The invaders soon abandoned the island and their encomiendas, but only after having demolished the territorial systems of the indigenous people. Bobos and a reconquista hato 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. Bobos and hato
became foundations of a Puerto Rican vernacular that expressed its dual parentage: the Taíno and the African. Between 1553 and 1810 the moitié, or cross-breeding, of the Taíno, African and Spanish cultures occurred as the island slowly repopulated. In these years, the major spatio-cultural arenas were the farm and the town. The farm (homenestead), was isolated and severely limited by the island's mountainous topography. Hóbis and, later, casas de haciendas, 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 undecorated plaza, oftentimes no more than a clearing, at the center. The plaza was surrounded by symbols of European power—church and cabildo—religious and civil government buildings that formed the core of the nascent new civic life. The plaza was also where informal markets and religious festivities occurred. It mediated between the town and its hinterland, while attesting to the hegemony—control of European culture over the island's landscapes. This territorial differentiation made for sharper class demarcation in housing structures, particularly between the hóbis of the jíbaro, or rural peasants, and the casas of the townspeople, usually clergy, artisans, merchants and military. Casas were made of wood or masonry, emulating Spanish or other European architectural styles, and those owned by merchants being the most elaborate. Hóbis 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 hóbis varied in relation to their owner's social position; those of slaves and the landless, agrícolas, were possibly the most rustic and least evolved from the original Taíno dwelling.

One pictorial record of this differentiation is found in El Víboras, a painting made in 1894 by the Puerto Rican artist Francisco Oller. El Víboras depicts a peasant child's wake, a jíbaro celebration emulating a Baquio, a traditional African ritual. The site of the celebration is not a large public place, such as a church or a plaza, but a jíbaro's home—which comprises a hóbis, a small, rustic, single-room hut, and, possibly, an outside room, the hays.

The hóbis depicted in the painting has a wooden floor isolating the structure from the terrain, protecting it from the elements, a significant improvement over early Taíno huts built on ram- panted 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 hóbis 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 hóbis in El Víboras had become a new structure, an emerging vernacular combining cultural elements from three sources: from the Taíno, the hut; from African, 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. El Víboras 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 jíbaro's house 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 jíbaro, their isolation on their farms was a centripetal force that bonded them to their land and neighbors. Events like that depicted in El Víboras provided social and cultural bonding in the most important of the ordinary landscapes of his period: the rural hóbis and the hays, 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 bajuras, or lowlands, the expanding sugar economy resulted in the construction of sugar factories, or centralos. 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 centralos. 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 bajuras, before long, many of the new arrivals became surplus labor as the new economy could not absorb them. By the 1940s, most were compelled to migrate once again, this time to the island’s urban nucleations. The built-up areas in the center of these urban areas served as residential quarters for the elites and for a very small middle class (mostly professionals), as well as the location of major civic, cultural and economic institutions.

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

Urban casita 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 1970s 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, cañita acquired a new status in the island’s lore. They became part of the narrative that recalled the destruction of a peasant agricultural society, one that seemed less threatening when looked at from a distant time.

Puerto Rican migration to New York City and elsewhere peaked during the same period. To those who left, images of cañita were imprinted in their collective memory as emblems of the old world, a “fantasized 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, cañita became repositories of tradition, modulating change while assuring permanence and the transmigration of a legacy. When Visitado Plaza de Cabo Rojo, a very old town on Puerto Rico’s southern coast, I found an ancient 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 casear won by acclamation. They found one and rebuilt it in the middle of the town plaza.

Casitas and the Puerto Rican Diaspora

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

Circular migration continually exchanges people and refreshes cultural images; thus, casear 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, casa de campo, nostalgic references to yesterday’s quintas.

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


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