

Urban Development, Public Health, and the Environment: A Historical Case Study in San Juan, Puerto Rico and Possibilities for the Future

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, while I was researching the history of public health in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico in the section of the city of San Juan known as Puerta de Tierra, the windshield of our rental car was shattered. The damage was the result of a falling coconut. When I called the rental company, however, the representative immediately assumed the damage had been caused by vandalism and asked me what I was doing in a bad neighborhood like Puerta de Tierra. A good deal of the area's unsavory reputation comes from problems related to drugs and crime that emerged in some of the zone's housing projects in the 1980s, but the neighborhood's stigmatization has a longer history. At the time of the windshield incident, I had already found many documents in the archive dating back to the nineteenth century that discussed disease, inadequate housing, environmental challenges, and the poverty of the zone's inhabitants. However, with the coconut incident, I began to consider Puerta de Tierra's present and future, as well as its past. My gaze shifted from more general work on public health to an examination of the neighborhood where I spent my days.¹

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This article is the result of that effort. It examines the historical origins of

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the neighborhood's reputation for poor hygiene, disease, and environmental degradation and places that story in the context of Puerto Rico's development programs since the 1940s. I argue that trends that began in the late-1800s were reinforced by housing policies originating under the New Deal and continuing in various forms to the present. At the same time, many aspects of Puerto de Tierra's history—even events or programs that apparently caused the neighborhood to deteriorate—might contribute to its potential to become a flourishing urban center and a model for other cities.²

Since the mid-twentieth century, Puerto Rico and its capital city San Juan have experienced two major kinds of mass housing development. One is a wave of public housing project construction that began in the 1940s and 1950s and continues through the present day. These projects were supposed to be part of the solution to the often swampy, crowded urban slums that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as increasing numbers of people left rural areas seeking work in the city. The other type of development, which also persists today, is based on the U.S. model of suburbanization. Over the last 50 or 60 years, real estate developers have constructed thousands of private, detached homes, which have occupied more and more of the island's land.³ A group of Puerto Rican environmental scholars have called this explosion in horizontal housing—made possible by the privately owned car—"paramount to madness, given the limited amount of available land on the island."⁴ It is ironic that the island's license plates proclaim Puerto Rico to be the "Isla del Encanto" (Enchanted Isle), since private motorcars are what actually made it possible for developers to turn the previously lush countryside into housing projects.

In hindsight, it is easy to criticize both public and private housing initiatives of Puerto Rico. A certain amount of criticism is warranted; a lack of central planning, government cronyism, and even corruption have contributed to the issues created by both types of housing.⁵ However, it is important to understand the magnitude and urgency of the housing crisis faced by planners and officials in our consideration of their work. By 1950, 42 percent of the island's population lived in urban areas and about 46 percent of all dwellings in cities (about 95,000 homes) were considered slums.⁶ In 1940, only 50 percent of urban dwellings and 7.2 percent of countryside homes had indoor running water. Additionally, 35 percent of urban homes and a meager 3.3 percent of rural homes had flush toilets.⁷ From these numbers, one can see how pressing the problems of sanitation, public health, and overcrowding were and how ambitious the effort to provide adequate housing for all of the island's people was.

Initially, the two types of extensive housing development (public projects

and private developments) were linked in planners' minds. The idea was that urban dwellers would be temporarily moved from slums into public housing and would eventually move into the homes that private developers were constructing. But in reality, low-cost public housing was often not temporary for families who lacked the financial resources to move out. In fact, the government had to keep raising the maximum income residents of projects could earn in order for them not to be made homeless.⁸ However, a growing middle class and lower-middle class did move into the newly constructed private housing developments. Different subdivisions were designed to accommodate families of different economic means; the houses in each tract varied in style and amenities. One housing subdivision geared toward the lowest income buyers was Puerto Nuevo, construction of which began in the late 1940s. Puerto Nuevo is believed to be the world's largest private development of detached houses.⁹ The poor were moved into public projects—where many of them stayed—while the more fortunate settled down in tracts of private homes that increasingly overran urban open spaces and the countryside.

In Puerta de Tierra, unhygienic slums had developed by the late-nineteenth century, and public housing was seen as a promising alternative for the twentieth century. Many of the projects—while still representing meaningful improvements from the slums—were poorly designed, lacked essential maintenance and services, and did not provide access to shopping or neighborhood institutions. For these reasons, and because over time the projects increasingly became centers of crime and the drug trade, they often failed to provide good homes, personal safety, and a sense of community for their residents. Ultimately, public housing failed to substantially improve the neighborhood for all of its people. In fact, despite their departure from the slums, the residents of public housing were still stigmatized and viewed with suspicion. They were poor, had come from slums, and were often associated with danger and criminality. The impoverished residents were blamed for these abysmal conditions.¹⁰ To compound the stigma in the case of the projects in Puerta de Tierra, many of the residents were of African descent and experienced considerable racism. As Silvia Álvarez Curbelo and Aníbal Seúlveda point out, many projects were deliberately located in areas where the poor would not be visible to the more prosperous.¹¹ Las Gladiolas—a housing project in the Hato Rey section of San Juan—was demolished (in fact, imploded) in 2011, despite protests from residents that the building had been intentionally allowed to deteriorate in order to justify its demolition. Hato Rey has become the sleek, financial center of San Juan, and in this instance, it is possible that the poverty of the project residents had become all too visible.¹² Ironically, as will be

illustrated below, the neglect of Puerta de Tierra and the stigma attached to it and its residents, along with the existence of significant areas of government-controlled lands, led to low population density and little commercial development, permitting the reimagination of this well-located area of great natural beauty.

PUERTA DE TIERRA

Today, Puerta de Tierra is near San Juan's financial and commercial centers, cultural institutions, beaches, and recreational facilities. It is adjacent to the old Spanish colonial city of San Juan (today a national historic site) on a small islet (la isleta de San Juan) that is connected to the rest of the city (and the island of Puerto Rico) by bridges. Today, the neighborhood covers about 0.6 square miles.

Puerta de Tierra grew slowly in the early- and mid-nineteenth century. Large sections along the northern coast of the neighborhood fell under military rule, where fortifications were built to protect the walled city of San Juan. The creation of this defense zone actually prevented the development of a significant part of the neighborhood and preserved the possibility of creating recreational zones. Before the late 1860s, Puerta de Tierra's few residents lived there illegally and informally, mostly in small shacks that were constructed without municipal approval. In 1846, the population was 223, including 144 people of color (65 percent), 26 of whom were slaves.¹³ Although the military kept tight control over much of the zone, eventually it ceded land not considered essential for defense to the civil government.

In 1867, the government auctioned off housing lots. Most of these were bought by speculators who did not plan to live there themselves but saw potential in renting the housing lots to recently arrived workers.¹⁴ The population increased after the abolition of slavery in 1873, and with the decline of the sugar industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, more people came to the capital in search of employment.¹⁵ The demolition of the Puerta de Santiago (the door that linked the neighborhood with the walled city of San Juan) in 1897 facilitated the movement of people between the old city and Puerta de Tierra. The U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, along with the gradual reduction in coffee production under U.S. rule, brought another wave of migrants to the city.¹⁶ As San Juan itself became more and more crowded, Puerta de Tierra was seen as a place to house workers who could not afford the rents of the old city. In 1899, at the onset of U.S. control of the island, the population of Puerta de Tierra was 5,453; it peaked at almost 16,000 inhabitants in 1920 as more people came to work in tobacco factories and port facilities.

By 1980, the population had diminished to a little more than 5,000 people as there was less employment in the zone, and those who were able to moved out of an area that was increasingly considered dangerous. In 2013, the population was just 3,918.¹⁷ Of course, Puerta de Tierra is not the only area of Puerto Rico that experienced population loss in the twenty-first century. With the current debt crisis and the rise in unemployment rates since 2007, most cities and towns have lost residents. This trend is partly due to declining birth rates, but

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primarily to the fact that people have moved to the mainland in search of work.¹⁸ Because of Puerta de Tierra's historical lack of public services and reputation for being dangerous, many people had left the neighborhood prior to the current economic crisis that began in 2007.¹⁹

HOUSING AND DISEASE

After the auction of plots in 1867, some permits were issued for single-family dwellings. However, by the 1890s, tenements (often referred to as *ranchónes*) became the standard housing in the area. Neighborhoods of tenements and shacks were often referred to as *arrabales*, or slums. Most *ranchónes* were one-story high and were divided into a number of two-room apartments. In the 1890s, the average room in a *ranchón* (hut) measured 2.25 by 3 meters, or close to 73 square feet.²⁰ Perhaps even more alarming than the small size of the rooms was the fact that many of them were positioned underground, in totally windowless cellars that were sometimes referred to as caves.²¹ Some rented rooms were built over latrines, a practice that had been declared illegal but continued despite the condemnation of members of the Junta de Sanidad (Board of Health).²²

Although the population grew relatively slowly before the U.S. takeover, the spread of tenements, environmental degradation, and disease were already causing official concern—even while authorities continued to permit practices that contributed to these phenomena. In 1889, the Junta de Sanidad sent a commission to the area to investigate the widespread outbreak of diphtheria in Puerta de Tierra.²³ The Board of Health recommended that all rooms lower than street level in the neighborhood should be vacated, or the houses razed, but ultimately no action was taken.²⁴ As we shall see, throughout the years and up to the present, when confronted with problems of disease or deteriorating

buildings, officials often simply demolished the problematic housing, rather than striving to maintain homes where people had created meaningful communities.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Unhygienic housing conditions were only one of many other serious environmental problems tolerated by officials in Puerta de Tierra. Although condemned by government officials, the unsanitary conditions in the neighborhood were still not improved. The substandard development in Puerta de Tierra was likely encouraged because the neighborhood was sparsely populated and included few wealthy or educated residents who might have objected to its contamination. Therefore, the zone could be used for purposes deemed undesirable and unacceptable for more populated areas.

The same practices prevailed under both Spanish and U.S. administrations. After the U.S. occupation in 1899, the military government named a new Junta Superior de Sanidad (Superior Board of Health) comprised of three U.S. military doctors, a U.S. Marine Health Services officer, and two civilian Puerto Rican doctors.²⁵ The U.S. medical officers attempted to reorient public health norms according to U.S. practices and emphasized attacking particular infectious diseases that not only posed a risk to the local population, but also threatened the recently arrived U.S. residents. In 1904, the Junta Superior was replaced by the Department of Health, Welfare and Correction, and in 1911, by the Public Health Service (Servicio de Sanidad).²⁶ Several important public health campaigns led by U.S. medical officers succeeded in reducing the incidence of hookworm and malaria within 10 to 15 years of the U.S. occupation.²⁷ Despite the increasing dominance of bacteriology in medical science, the U.S. health authorities, like the Spanish, also focused on environmental concerns as a primary cause of disease. However, neither the campaigns against specific diseases nor the push to clean up the environment translated into improved environmental conditions or health in Puerta de Tierra. Conditions and practices in Puerta de Tierra remained remarkably consistent whether Spain or the United States held political power. This was due to a general lack of funds for public health on the island, a reliance on private charity that could not completely fill the gap, and because the poor residents of the neighborhood were not given top priority for limited resources.²⁸

In 1876, plans were submitted to build a municipal hospital on the central highway that ran from east to west through Puerta de Tierra (today Avenida Ponce de Leon). The massive structure, completed in 1887, never served as a

hospital but instead became the municipal jail.²⁹ Two years later, the municipal council and the mayor, concerned about the spread of leprosy in the city and the number of infected individuals who lived in low-lying areas of Puerta de Tierra, decided to build quarantine barracks for those suffering from the disease south of the jail—an area at the edge of a mangrove swamp occupied by poor people living in small huts, or *bohios*. An indication of the poverty and lack of public health regulation in Puerta de Tierra was the fact that the leprosy facility was soon occupied by a considerable number of people not suffering from the disease.³⁰

Puerta de Tierra also became one of the city's main locales for stabling horses, thus eliciting complaints about horses being kept either in poorly constructed stables adjacent to living quarters or below the floors of apartments. Most of the stables were said to be completely unhygienic, and there were also many cases of horses contracting glanders, and even incidents of humans who worked with the animals dying of the disease.³¹ Dead animals and animal parts were also frequently thrown into mangrove swamps near residential areas of Puerta de Tierra.³²

In fact, the *manglares*—or mangroves, which grew in relatively shallow water around the Puerta de Tierra's southern and eastern shores—were one aspect of the environment in Puerta de Tierra that everyone agreed was unhealthy and should be eliminated. In the nineteenth century, the poorest people in the area, who were mostly people of color, established their homes in the mangrove zones, often raising small houses on poles and creating walkways with planks on the frequently flooded ground. One of the poorest neighborhoods in the mangrove section was quaintly termed Sal Si Puedes (Leave If You Can). The residents of Sal Si Puedes and other poor, swampy, low-lying areas actually began the process of filling and drying the mangrove marshes.

Yet public health officials actually seemed to have an ambivalent attitude toward the mangroves. On the one hand, there was no shortage of reports suggesting that they were the cause of malaria and other diseases.³³ On the other hand, there was little public awareness of how government-sanctioned use of the mangroves contributed to environmental degradation and disease. For example, in 1894, in addition to dead animals and waste products, the Junta de Sanidad proposed throwing the city's garbage in the mangroves at the end of San Andres Street in Puerta de Tierra.³⁴ The abuse of the environment and the lack of adequate medical care led to rising mortality rates in Puerta de Tierra, especially among children. In the first five years of the twentieth century, residents who were five years old and under represented 30 percent of documented deaths. Of those, 75 percent died before their first birthdays. The most common causes

of death for children were gastrointestinal ailments, bronco-pneumonia, and other lung or respiratory diseases; malaria and meningo-encephalitis (which in some cases may have actually been cerebral malaria); and a vague condition called "wasting."³⁵

At this time, no one understood the environmental benefits of the unique ecosystems created by mangrove marshes or forests. Not only can these extraor-

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dinary plants survive in extremely salty conditions, but they are also home to many species of animals and food sources for others. Their complex root systems allow mangroves to survive ocean tides and prevent sediment from rushing out to sea,

while the trunks and branches of the plants prevent erosion from waves.³⁶ It is hopeful but ironic that environmental groups today encourage young people to plant mangroves at the edge of a lagoon not far from where they were once energetically destroyed in the early twentieth century. The recognition of the benefits of, and subsequent attempts to restore, the natural environment is a factor that may enhance the quality of life in a revitalized Puerto de Tierra.³⁷

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BUBONIC PLAGUE

Despite neighborhood residents organizing protests, especially for better medical services, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Puerto de Tierra remained an area where refuse was disposed of, with execrable housing and high levels of preventable disease. In 1912, things took a turn for the worse with an outbreak of bubonic plague. The first cases of plague occurred in Puerto de Tierra, and most of the people affected were young, robust men. One of the first to die of the disease was Pedro Colón, who lived in a tenement in Puerto de Tierra called Carolina and was working on the construction of a house on Cristo Street in San Juan. He became ill on a Tuesday and died the following Friday. His cousin, with whom he lived in the same ranchón, also became ill and died in a matter of days in the municipal hospital. Both had high fevers, nausea, and painful inguinal buboes (swelling in the groin area).³⁸

Altogether, there were 55 diagnosed cases of the illness, and probably more that went undiagnosed.³⁹ Of the cases determined to be plague, the mortality rate was 65 percent. Since bubonic plague was known to be spread by rat fleas, the main approach of the U.S. Public Health Service was to rat-proof dwell-

ings, stores, and warehouses. This approach was realized in two ways: either by raising houses two feet above the ground and leaving the underpinning free or by surrounding the structure with a concrete wall that extended two feet below the ground and was fitted flush to the floor of the building.⁴⁰ There was also widespread trapping and poisoning of rats, as well as inspection of outgoing freight. According to Richard Creel, a surgeon from the U.S. Public Health Service, “the destruction of buildings was considered unjustifiable in a general way, unless done by the owner in preference to rat proofing.”⁴¹

However, the neighborhood of Puerta de Tierra was treated quite differently. The disease originated in the area—a majority of reported cases were traced to the neighborhood.⁴² In keeping with the tendency to blame the neighborhood’s misery on its impoverished residents, Creel remarked in his report on the epidemic that the people of Puerta de Tierra “live, as a rule, in squalor, and the[ir] premises, even at this date are with difficulty kept free from garbage.”⁴³ In fact, during the outbreak, police and sanitary brigades destroyed numerous houses in the area. On 21 June 1912, the newspaper *El Tiempo* reported, “Last night various houses of little value in Puerta de Tierra were destroyed by fire. Today in different parts of the neighborhood they are pulling down many houses.”⁴⁴ The destruction of homes took place almost exclusively in Sal Si Puedes and other neighborhoods near the mangroves, even though Creel himself reported that these swampy areas were less likely to attract rats than houses with walls made of various clay mixtures referred to as *mamposteria*. Rats could not burrow in areas that were frequently flooded, and most of the shacks in areas like Sal Si Puedes were already elevated above the ground, making it difficult for rats to access them.⁴⁵ In fact, the majority of the cases of the plague in Puerta de Tierra were in the crowded but drier and more prosperous areas, where many relatively wealthier tobacco workers lived. Most of the serious “rat harbors,” as Creel put it, were food storehouses on more elevated commercial streets. While all of Puerta de Tierra was stigmatized, authorities assumed that the poorest people who lived in the low-lying zones—many of whom were of African descent—were the source of the epidemic.

All of the ranking sanitary officials went together to Sal Si Puedes to investigate the situation. *El Tiempo* reported that they were determined to “tear down as many houses as necessary.”⁴⁶ When the head of the Junta del Sanidad, Francisco del Valle Atilas, was asked if he thought it was necessary to torch all of Puerta de Tierra, he replied that the junta had agreed to authorize the chief of Sanidad, Mr. Lippitt, “to destroy what was necessary without any limitations.”⁴⁷ Also, on 21 June 1912, the acting governor, M. Drew Carrell, ordered the destruction

of many houses “of little importance” in Sal Si Puedes that he suspected to be dens of rats. Carrell said that the owners of the houses would be compensated by the government, but gave no indication of what would happen to the houses’ occupants, whether they were owners or renters.⁴⁸ In fact, the only reference to possible shelter for the recently homeless was of a site for a tent encampment, which was meant to house people from infected districts whose houses had been destroyed or those who had been exposed to the plague.⁴⁹

As more people died, more houses were destroyed in Puerta de Tierra: 14 on 22 June and 23 on 25 June. It is difficult to determine the exact number of dwellings that were destroyed, but it was certainly between 50 and 100. However, the problem was not only that people’s homes were being demolished. Even those who did not lose their houses were forced to empty them out and dispose of anything that might possibly harbor fleas. There were many references to burning household garbage, and incinerators were set up at various points of Puerta de Tierra to do just that. An editorial in *El Tiempo* on 21 June 1912 mentions that what was being burned was not always garbage in the conventional sense of the word. The writer pointed out that the poor bore the brunt of these cleanup operations, being forced to throw away garments and even having to surrender small pieces of household furniture that might appear useless to some but were essential to their owners.

The actual origin of the plague was never determined, though there was consensus that it had originated in the docks and had been brought in from outside of the country.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the U.S.-controlled government did everything possible to support merchants and to avoid delays in the shipping and delivery of goods.⁵¹ Yet, for the average resident, relatively normal commerce did not mean that things functioned normally during the epidemic. There was general alarm, if not wild panic due to the epidemic, and many of the wealthiest San Juaneros fled the city. Some tried to secure passage on departing steamships. Other cities on the island reacted by trying to prohibit anyone from San Juan from entering their jurisdictions. There was said to be fear in Aguadilla because many tobacco workers who presently worked in Puerta de Tierra were expected to return to their homes there.⁵² The mayors of Arecibo, Lares, Manatí, and Utuado were alarmed by the exodus from San Juan to other parts of the island and asked officials to curtail it. They strongly protested the influx from Puerta de Tierra to their respective jurisdictions.⁵³ Furthermore, in a request that must have offered some satisfaction to one of Puerto Rico’s most stigmatized groups, the leprosy patients at the Isle of Cabras asylum asked the medical inspector not to let any outsiders get close to the hospital.⁵⁴

There are scant references to the residents of Puerta de Tierra protesting the demolition of their homes and destruction of their property; the poor were mostly praised for their cooperation and civic responsibility.⁵⁵ We do not know how people in Puerta de Tierra felt about being singled out as the source of the plague and viewed as pariahs by the rest of the country. However, on 22 June 1912, *El Tiempo* reported that inhabitants of Puerta de Tierra were indignant when it came to light that the only infected rat up until then had been discovered

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in the tenement known as Carolina (that was not in a low-lying zone near the mangroves).⁵⁶ That building was left untouched while other homes—with no confirmed presence of the plague—were destroyed “by the dozens.”⁵⁷

Although the vast majority of residents in Puerta de Tierra were working class, there were still considerable differences in income and living standards among them. The elite in the neighborhood were unionized, male tobacco workers, who might earn as much as \$18 a week and live in tenements in the dryer and more salubrious sections, particularly along San Agustín Street.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the poorest people in the area were primarily Afro–Puerto Rican women who were mostly laundresses and lived in marshy slums like Sal Si Puedes. The plague epidemic exacerbated these racial and economic differences. The homes located in the poorest swampy areas were most often destroyed, even after it became clear that few of them harbored rats. Meanwhile the more prosperous residents, who were often skilled workers and members of the Federación Libre de Trabajadores (FLT), a craft union associated with conservative U.S. union leader Samuel Gompers, made proposals that were frequently detrimental to the neighborhood’s most impoverished.

The FLT took an active role during the epidemic, organizing mass meetings to discuss the proposals of Santiago Iglesias and other union leaders. The organization’s most important proposal dealt with remaking Puerta de Tierra. The FLT demanded radical action, instructing workers to proceed “with great energy” and to tear down buildings to create orderly streets and hygienic conditions. Santiago Iglesias even went so far as to say that, “if it was necessary to impose health measures militarily it should be done; measures should be taken by force without heeding anyone’s protests.”⁵⁹ The union blamed the League of Proprietors of San Juan for the problem, accusing them of building substandard housing and overcrowded, subterranean apartments. They favored the creation

of a modern, comfortable *barrio obrero* (workers' neighborhood) to replace Puerta de Tierra's slums.⁶⁰ However, there was a certain irony in their call to flatten the neighborhood: other groups in Puerta de Tierra had long hoped to get rid of the organized working class in Puerta de Tierra, who they considered troublemakers and blamed for crime and disorder in the area.⁶¹ Furthermore, the call to destroy homes—even though the construction of a more pleasant and healthy neighborhood was proposed—demonstrates how out of touch the craft unionists of the FLT were with the reality of most of the poorer inhabitants in the neighborhood. The plan to simply obliterate the houses of the poor during the bubonic plague epidemic was mirrored more than half a century later when the housing projects slum dwellers had been moved to were deemed so rundown and dangerous that they were also scheduled for demolition.

The bubonic plague should have been a wake-up call: the years of treating Puerta de Tierra as a waste heap came back to haunt the officials and elite residents of San Juan and other parts of the island in the form of a dreaded disease. Unfortunately, those who suffered the most were Puerta de Tierra's residents, and the neighborhood became more stigmatized than ever. After the bubonic plague subsided, Puerta de Tierra suffered other epidemics and the government did not take prompt action to improve the health or amenities in the neighborhood. A severe epidemic of measles decimated the neighborhood's children in 1917, many of whom were struck particularly hard due to extreme malnutrition. In that instance, most help came from charitable groups and the church, rather than from the public health establishment.⁶² In 1921, the region experienced another outbreak of bubonic plague.

Over the decades, though, public health gradually improved, and there was more planned urban development in Puerta de Tierra. Beginning in the 1910s and 1920s, cultural and educational institutions, such as the Ateneo Puertorriqueño and the School of Tropical Medicine, were built on the west end of Puerta de Tierra, where the neighborhood adjoined Old San Juan.⁶³ In the 1920s, San Juan Bay and San Antonio Channel (between Puerta de Tierra and Santurce) were dredged, and the material was used to fill in the remaining mangrove area and expand the docks and port area. In 1926, lands were allotted for the Parque Muñoz Rivera, which stretches in front of the former prison, today the Archivo General de Puerto Rico. The park was the first on such a grand scale designed in San Juan. In 1937, a striking art-deco public housing complex called El Falansterio, which eventually became an owner co-op that is still occupied today, was built for working class tenants. In 1949–50, the luxurious Hotel Caribe Hilton was built at the end of the north shore near the Condado Beach area.

The slums, or *arrabales*, behind the Avenida Ponce de Leon (where the archive and the Parque Muñoz Rivera are located) were replaced in the 1940s by low-income public projects. Forty years later, some of these projects had become so run-down and infested with drugs that many longtime residents moved out of Puerta de Tierra, desperate to escape crime and violence. In 1996, the high-rise Acacia housing project was destroyed; demolition was considered cheaper and more effective than restoring it or confronting the crime and violence that were rampant in the building.⁶⁴ Once again, as during the bubonic plague epidemic, the preferred solution was simply to destroy housing, rather than deal with the actual social conditions that caused the problems. Low-rise projects in the area have also had trouble with drugs and crime. In April 2015, the city began demolishing the low-rise project known as Residencial Puerta de Tierra. The demolition was scheduled to take about a year. San Agustín Street, once the central residential and commercial street occupied by more prosperous workers, is still commercial but now has many abandoned buildings and other evidence of drug abuse. Yet, a few blocks away, several elegant, sleek condominiums on the Parque Muñoz Rivera offer their occupants luxury and views of both the ocean and the bay.

A MODEL URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD?

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Given the present run-down conditions in a large sector of Puerta de Tierra, it is hard to conceive of the area as offering an alternative style of urban living—one not plagued by slums or overrun by unimaginative tract homes. Yet, the resources and amenities are there. Puerta de Tierra has green space, a park, an ocean beach, and access to the colonial charms of Old San Juan, as well as beaches on the Condado strip, Santurce's museums, new theaters, and concert venues nearby. Puerta de Tierra is not full of shopping centers, private housing estates, or fast food restaurants, and until recently had relatively good public transportation. In an odd way, the long-term stigma attached to Puerta de Tierra, combined with the continued existence of public lands, which have both contributed to a lack of crowding and development, could make it a model city neighborhood. That is, a place where people of different incomes could enjoy the advantages of living in attractive apartments in the center of a major city and, instead of having individual yards and lawns, share community recreational and cultural resources.

There is even a model to be built on Puerta de Tierra, El Falansterio, one of the first housing projects in Puerto Rico that was completed in 1937 under the aegis of the Puerto Rican Relief Administration during the New Deal with

funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Act. Designed by the architect Jorge Ramírez de Arellano, it was originally called Tenement Group A. However, because of its art-deco architecture and design around courtyards, it was nicknamed El Falansterio by detractors who did not appreciate its unusual style. They were comparing it to the Phalansteries, or self-sufficient, contained communities that were proposed in the early nineteenth century by French utopian socialist Charles Fourier. The nickname stuck, and today, El Falansterio is owned by its residents as a condominium of 216 apartments and is in the National Registry of Historic Places. Some of the reasons for its nomination for this honor were described in the application by the State Architect, Armando Morales Parés. He wrote:

The well-planned symmetrical layout ha[s] successfully created a sense of belonging and security to its owners. Its harmon[i]ous and homogeneous design with the simplicity of its layout and structures, the relationship of each building to the other, its controlled patios and open spaces have achieved what no other public housing development ha[s] in Puerto Rico, pride in their owners. Another unique feature that stands out in this project lies in being the only district in Puerto Rico where the Art Deco style is fully expressed at its best. The strong simplicity of its facade lines with its geometrical ornamentation and projections, the use of new materials (reinforced concrete) coupled with the perfect planned distribution have made the Falansterio the best example of a successful public apartment housing development in Puerto Rico.⁶⁵

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It is possible to imagine other attractive, contained communities like El Falansterio in Puerta de Tierra that would still leave plenty of open space for accessible shopping, commercial, educational, and recreational facilities. The whole area could easily be connected to the aforementioned areas of San Juan by public transportation.

But, at this point, it looks like Puerta de Tierra will have a different kind of future. San Juan's municipal government and real estate developers have come to realize the commercial potential of the area, and their plan has been to make it attractive to visitors from other neighborhoods and tourists. On the bay side sits the enormous Bahía Urbana megaproject, expected to be completed in 20 to 30 years. Today, it is an outdoor concert venue that offers a promenade where people can stroll and look at the water. Eventually, it is supposed to include housing and commercial spaces as well. On the ocean side, Paseo Puerta de Tierra, a pedestrian and bike path that has been under construction for about two years, will run the entire length of the north shore of Puerta de Tierra and

link Condado with the edge of Old San Juan. This project has been criticized: by environmentalists for destroying the fragile ecology of the area; by archaeologists for damaging buried colonial constructions; by neighbors who protest the destruction of the area's view and the increased car traffic that the planned pedestrian area will bring into the area; and by merchants and business people in Viejo San Juan who are afraid of the effect created by the reduction of lanes of traffic going into the city. This process is reminiscent of the nineteenth century, when residents of Puerta de Tierra were not consulted about other neighborhood projects that had a serious impact on their environment and quality of life.

What will happen remains to be seen. Given Puerto Rico's crippling debt and the absence of any meaningful proposals to solve the debt crisis, it is not likely that the situation in Puerta de Tierra, or elsewhere on the island, will vastly improve. The demands by bondholders that they be paid first from any available revenue means that the government may have to cut municipal services, such as transportation and education, and there is little likelihood of investment in major urban residential projects.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Puerta de Tierra is a wonderful neighborhood that offers a possible solution to the problems of inadequate public housing, suburban sprawl, and dependency on automobiles that plague not only Puerto Rico but also many other places in our world. 

NOTES

1. Special thanks to Johnny Torres, former resident of Puerta de Tierra who maintains the Puerta de Tierra website, and Father Manuel Rodríguez, former Provincial of the Redemptorist San Juan Province, for making the archives of the Redemptorist Fathers available to me and for helping me to understand the neighborhood.

2. In 1934, Eleanor Roosevelt visited San Juan and expressed shock and dismay at the extreme poverty in which many residents of the city lived. See: Silvia Álvarez Curbelo and Anibal Sepúlveda Rivera, *De vuelta a la ciudad: San Juan de Puerto Rico, 1997–2001* (San Juan: Fundación Sila M. Calderón, 2011), 142.

3. Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, "Temporary Housing, Permanent Communities: Public Housing Policy and Design in Puerto Rico," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 3 (2007): 467–492; Telesforo Carrero, *Housing in Puerto Rico* (Santurce, Puerto Rico: Office of the Governor, Puerto Rico Planning Board, 1950); Curbelo and Rivera, *De vuelta a la ciudad*, 145–147; Anibal Sepúlveda Rivera, "Viejos cañaverales, casas nuevas: Muñoz versus el syndrome Long," in *Luis Muñoz Marín: Perfiles de su gobernación*, ed. Fernando Picó (San Juan: Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín, 2003), 167–209; Rubén Nazario Velasco, "Pan, casa, libertad: De la reforma agraria a la especulación inmobiliaria," in *Picó*, ed. Luis Muñoz Marín, 145–66.

4. Neftali García-Martínez, Tania García-Ramos, and Ana Rivera-Rivera, "Puerto Rico: Economic and Environmental Overview," in *Beyond Sun and Sand: Caribbean Environmentalisms*, ed. Sherrie L. Baver and Barbara Deutsch Lynch (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 77.

5. Sepúlveda Rivera, "Viejos cañaverales," 167–209; Rubén Nazario Velasco, "Pan, casa, libertad," 145–66.

6. Carrero, *Housing in Puerto Rico*, 15.

7. *Ibid.*, 6.

8. Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, "Temporary Housing, Permanent Communities," 467–492.

9. Puerto Nuevo had 4,426 dwellings in 1950. Carrero, *Housing in Puerto Rico*, 11.

10. Curbelo and Rivera, *De vuelta a la ciudad*, 145–147.

11. Ibid., 147.

12. Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia, “Unmaking Public Housing Towers,” *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space* 11, no. 2 (2015): 167–196; “A oscuros Las Gladiolas en turno a diseño de nuevo complejo residencial,” *NotiCel*, July 25, 2014, <http://www.noticel.com/noticia/163726/a-oscuras-las-gladiolas-en-torno-a-diseno-de-nuevo-complejo-residencial.html>.

13. Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo: Documentos Municipales (Municipal Documents), Serie: San Juan, Caja 127, *Padron del censo de almas que corresponde al Barrio de Puerta de Tierra. Año 1846*; “People of color” refers to both those classified as “negro” (66 people) and “mulatto” (78).

14. Aníbal Sepúlveda Rivera and Silvia Álvarez Curbelo, “De ‘zona polémica’ a barrio: Puerta de Tierra y el nacimiento de un espacio urbano en San Juan,” in *San Juan: la ciudad que rebasó sus murallas*, ed. Luis E. González Vales et al. (San Juan: National Park Service and Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2005), 86–98; Arturo Bird Carmona, *Parejeros y desafiante: la comunidad tabaquera de Puerta de Tierra del siglo XX* (San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 2008), 135–175.

15. Cesar J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 16–20.

16. Ibid.

17. Aníbal Sepúlveda and Jorge Carbonell, *San Juan Extramuros: Iconografía para su estudio* (San Juan: Carimar, 1990), 61; “American Fact Finder,” U.S. Census Bureau.

18. Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz, “The Causes and Consequences of Puerto Rico’s Declining Population,” in *Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Current Issues in Economics and Finance* 20, no. 4 (2014).

19. Linda Backiel, “Puerto Rico: The Crisis is About Colonialism, Not Debt,” *Monthly Review* 67, no. 5 (2015).

20. Aníbal Sepúlveda and Silvia Álvarez Curbelo, “De ‘zona polémica,’” in *San Juan: La ciudad que rebasó sus murallas*, ed. Luis E. González Vales et al., 94.

21. Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Documentos Municipales (Municipal Documents), Serie: San Juan, Sub-serie: Actas (Minutes), Junta de Sanidad (Board of Health), Caja 85, October 15, 1889.

22. Actas, September 2, 1892.

23. In 1883 the diphtheria bacterium had been identified, and it was known that the disease generally spread through respiratory droplets (sneezes and coughs) and was most common in crowded environments with poor hygiene such as those that existed in Puerta de Tierra.

24. Actas, October 15, 1889.

25. José G. Rigau-Pérez, “El Servicio de Salud Pública de los Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico, 1898–1918,” *Revista del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas* 19 (2009–2010): 143–77.

26. José G. Rigau-Pérez, “La Salud en Puerto Rico en el Siglo XX,” *Puerto Rico Health Science Journal* 19, no. 4 (2000): 358–359; Rigau-Pérez, “El Servicio de Salud Pública,” 143–77.

27. Even the successful anti-hook worm campaign, though it prescribed medicine for anemia sufferers, also emphasized altering the environmental causes of the disease. Blanca G. Silvestrini, “El impacto de la política de salud pública de los Estados Unidos en Puerto Rico, 1898–1913,” in *Politics, Society and Culture in the Caribbean*, ed. Blanca G. Silvestrini (San Juan: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1983), 76–77.

28. José G. Rigau-Pérez, “Respuestas a crisis sanitarias en Puerto Rico, 1898–1919: Gobierno, organizaciones y personas” (paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association annual meeting, San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 2015).

29. In 1906, it became the Puerto Rican American Tobacco Company factory and was later a Bacardi Rum warehouse, before finally being converted into the Archivo General de Puerto Rico in 1973.

30. Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Documentos Municipales (Municipal Documents), San Juan, Sanidad (Health), Legajo 125 ½, pieza I, #115e; On later facilities for people suffering from Hansen’s Disease in Puerto Rico, see: Julie H. Levison, “Beyond Quarantine: A History of Leprosy in Puerto Rico, 1898–1930s,” *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 10, no. 1 (2003).

31. Actas, September 1, 1891–September 28, 1895; Glanders is an infectious disease mainly found in horses. It is caused by the bacterium *Burkholderia mella*. The infection causes nodular lesions that tend

to break down and form ulcers. Glanders can be transmitted to humans who have contact with tissues or body fluids of infected animals. See: "Glanders' Homepage," Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

32. Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Documentos Municipales (Municipal Documents), Sanidad (Health), Legajo 126, pieza II, exp. #230, 1899.

33. One example is a 1898 report by a member of the Junta de Sanidad explaining that miasmas rising from mangroves caused both malaria and typhoid. See: Actas, September 29, 1898.

34. Actas, September 18, 1894.

35. AGPR, Documentos Municipales, San Juan, Inhumaciones, (Burial Records), Legajo 132, Pieza I, exps. # 1-15, 1900-1901; Inhumaciones, Legajo 132, Pieza II, exps. # 16-37, 1903-1904.

36. "Mangroves," *National Geographic*, February 2007, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/02/mangroves/warne-text/1>.

37. Observation of planting by author. For information and photographs at San Juan Bay Estuary Program, please see: *San Juan Bay Estuary* (blog), http://sanjuanbayestuary.blogspot.mx/2010_11_01_archive.html.

38. "Patients develop sudden onset of fever, headache, chills, and weakness and one or more swollen, tender and painful lymph nodes (called buboes). This form of the disease usually results from the bite of an infected flea. The bacteria multiply in the lymph node closest to where the bacteria entered the human body." See: "Plague Symptoms," Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

39. Dr. Gómez Brioso, Chief of Bureau of Transmissible Diseases to Dr. W. R. Watson, Acting Director of Sanitation, *Boletín Oficial de la Dirección de Sanidad* 1, no. 3 (1912): 30-33.

40. Richard H. Creel, *Outbreak and Suppression of Plague in Porto Rico: An Account of the Course of the Epidemic and the Measures Employed for Its Suppression by the United States Public Health Service* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913).

41. Creel, *Outbreak and Suppression of Plague in Puerto Rico*, 9.

42. *Ibid.*, 21.

43. *Ibid.*, 14.

44. "Información sobre la enfermedad sospechosa," *El Tiempo*, June 21, 1912.

45. Creel, 15.

46. "Información sobre la enfermedad sospechosa," *El Tiempo*, June 21, 1912.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. "Información sobre la epidemia," *El Tiempo*, June 24, 1912.

50. Rigau-Pérez, "La Salud en Puerto Rico en el Siglo XX."

51. After Puerto Rico was invaded by the United States in 1898, the island became what was known as an "unincorporated" territory of the United States. The United States incrementally granted the island more self-government. In 1900, under the Foraker Act, a civil government was installed. In this government, only the 35-member House of Delegates was elected by Puerto Rican men. The U.S. president appointed all other officials. In 1917, under the Jones Act, Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship and given more self-rule. In 1952, a constitution was drafted that allowed for an elected governor and a bicameral congress that gave Puerto Ricans more control over insular affairs. Puerto Ricans cannot vote in U.S. presidential elections and have no voting representation in the U.S. Congress. See: Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*.

52. "14 casas destruidas en Sal si Puede," *El Tiempo*, June 22, 1912.

53. "Últimas noticias sobre la epidemia," *El Tiempo*, June 23, 1912.

54. "Información sobre la epidemia," *El Tiempo*, June 24, 1912.

55. "Información sobre la enfermedad sospechosa," *El Tiempo*, June 21, 1912.

56. "14 casas destruidas en Sal si Puede," *El Tiempo*, June 22, 1912.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Government of Porto Rico, Department of Labor, Charities and Correction, Bureau of Labor, *Special Report of the Bureau of Labor to the Legislature of Porto Rico, December 16, 1912* (San Juan: Bureau of Supplies, Printing and Transportation, 1913), 56.

59. "Información sobre la epidemia," *El Tiempo*, June 25, 1912.

60. Arturo Bird Carmona, *Parejeros y desafiantes*, 144–45; National Archives, Bureau of Insular Affairs, *To the citizens of San Juan and its Wards*, Record Group 350, files 848–98.

61. A few years after the plague epidemic, during a strike of 3,000 workers in tobacco factories in Puerta de Tierra, the chronicler for the Padres Redentoristas, spiritual leaders of the neighborhood's imposing church of San Agustín, expressed the hope that as a result of the strike, the factory would close and force the workers to leave the area. The chronicler added, "If this does happen it will be a blessing for us, for the low element we have here now must leave and perhaps a few good people will move in." *Chronica Domus ad San Agustín*, Puerta de Tierra, Porto Rico, March 28, 1914.

62. *Ibid.*, February–March, 1917, 109–117.

63. El Ateneo Puertorriqueño was founded by Puerto Rico's most distinguished nineteenth-century intellectuals to promote science, letters, and the arts. It is Puerto Rico's oldest cultural institution, which moved to its building in Puerta de Tierra in 1922. See: "Ateneo Puertorriqueño": La Casa de la Nación Puertorriqueña website, <http://ateneopr.org/inicio/>.

64. Puerta de Tierra website, <http://www.puertadetierra.info/index.asp>.

65. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Registry of Historic Places, Nomination Form for El Falansterio de Puerta de Tierra, April 4, 1984, <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NRHP/Text/84003166.pdf>.

66. Linda Backiel, "Puerto Rico."