

**Florian Urban, "La Perla, Puerto Rico: Beyond Formal and Informal"**

in Alan Mayne, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Modern Slum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 516-537.

La Perla is Puerto Rico's best known "slum." It covers five hectares of coastland outside the seventeenth-century walls of Old San Juan, the historic Old Town of the Puerto Rican capital, which in 1983 was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site (figure 1). The picturesque location and the decades-long activities of planners and sociologists have earned La Perla a worldwide reputation. The neighborhood is famously portrayed in Oscar Lewis's 1965 book *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (where it appears under the alias "La Esmeralda"), as well as in later studies by Helen Safa, Lucilla Marvel, and many others.<sup>1</sup> It became integrated into US development policies, which in the mid-twentieth-century attempted to convert Puerto Rico from a "backward Third World" country into a blooming capitalist economy. La Perla is also emblematic of Puerto Rico's border situation at the interstices of the developed and the developing worlds, colonial and post-colonial governance, English and Spanish speaking cultures, and American and European influences. Puerto Rico is the third largest Caribbean island, with a population of approximately 3.7 million people (2010 census). From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries it was a Spanish colony, and the island is still Spanish speaking. In 1898 it became a US territory and its inhabitants were granted US citizenship in 1917. In 1947 it was given a certain degree of autonomy as the Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (translated as "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico").



Figure 1. La Perla from the walls of Old San Juan, looking east, in 2013 (author).

<sup>1</sup> For example, Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Random House, 1965); Helen Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1974); Lucilla Marvel, *Listen to What They Say: Planning and Community Development in Puerto Rico* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: La Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2008).

La Perla is a Latin American “slum” that is both typical and untypical. In terms of architecture, planning, and legal situation, the neighborhood has always been characterized by a combination of formal and informal elements. There was both self-help construction and profit-driven development, stable and improvised buildings, unequal power relations, and strong economic ties to the rest of the city. The analysis will thus question the validity of the formal-informal distinction that is fundamental in recent literature on “slums,” and is at the same time deeply engrained in mid-twentieth-century development and modernization ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

La Perla is unusual in many respects. First, it has a century-old history harking back to the 1910s, unlike most other Latin American “slums” that evolved first and foremost in the post-1945 period. Second, it had an atypical demographic development, since it shrank rather than grew over the course of the mid-twentieth century, from its all-time population high of about 4,000 people in 1937 to less than 150 in the early 2000s. Third, it only partially originated as a “squat,” as the main portions around the old slaughterhouse were originally built with the landowners’ consent.<sup>3</sup> And fourth, given its prominence in generously-funded US development programs, it is unusually well documented. This stands in contrast to most other informal neighborhoods in Puerto Rico and elsewhere and is related to La Perla’s conspicuous location. There are tax records and municipal surveys, there are several scholarly studies, and there is detailed documentation of the “upgrading” efforts. There is also a substantial body of photographs and newspaper articles. Most of these materials are kept in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico.

La Perla nonetheless exemplifies many themes that are connected to “slums” all over the world. Recent studies at a global level either echoed apocalyptic visions of a planet drowning in misery (for example, Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*), or focused on slum-dwellers’ energy and entrepreneurialism (exemplified by Robert Neuwirth’s *Shadow Cities*). The numerous case studies done since the 1970s have tended to take the latter perspective, not denying misery and deprivation, but focusing on the solutions that slum dwellers found for their situation.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, La Perla over the course of the twentieth century was interpreted very differently in relation to the rest of the city. In the early 1900s it was a modest neighborhood, poorer than the adjacent Old San Juan, but not categorically different. In the mid-twentieth century it was increasingly seen as a slum/informal neighborhood and regularly compared unfavorably with the “formal city” of Old San Juan; unlike the latter the municipal authorities deemed it an eyesore, a den of crime, and in need of clearance and rebuilding. In the late-twentieth century La Perla’s public image, once again, became more similar to that of the adjacent formal neighborhoods, as the area was transformed by upgrading and the beginning of gentrification.

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<sup>2</sup> See Florian Urban, “La Perla: 100 Years of Informal Architecture in San Juan, Puerto Rico,” *Planning Perspectives* 30 no. 4 (October 2015): 495-536.

<sup>3</sup> Squats or *rescates* (“rescues” of land) occurred since the late 1960s in Puerto Rico and were highly politicized acts. Many of these squats were later legalized. See Liliana Cotto, *Desalambrar: Orígenes de los Rescates de Terreno en Puerto Rico y su Pertinencia en los Movimientos Sociales Contemporáneos* (San Juan: Tal Cual, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, John F. C. Turner, “Dwelling Resources in South America,” *Architectural Design* 33 no. 8 (1963): 360-393; Lisa Redfield Peattie, *The View from a Barrio* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968); John Habraken, *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (London: The Architectural Press, 1972); Peter Lloyd, *Slums of Hope? Shantytowns of the Third World* (London: Penguin, 1979); Marvel, *Listen to What They Say*.

## **A MODEST NEIGHBORHOOD**

La Perla, in the early twenty-first century, reveals both peace and decay. Descending from the stately fortifications overlooking a deep blue sea, and wandering through the winding and only partially paved roads of La Perla, one feels in a village rather than in the center of Puerto Rico's largest urban agglomeration of approximately 1.5 million people. The houses are built from brick and concrete; they are plastered and painted in bright colors; most have porches or balconies. The majority have been rebuilt and extended over time. There is rubbish on the streets and in the gardens, and several houses are in ruins. Others are very well kept, carefully decorated, and adorned with flowerpots or murals. There are chatting neighbors; children are running around, there are chickens picking on the streets. One can go shopping in a few mom-and-pop stores, and there are several makeshift bars and car workshops. La Perla gives the impression of poverty and need, but also of an attractively humane neighborhood inhabited by a tightly-knit community.

La Perla's origins were not that different from that of poor formal neighborhoods in other countries. It first grew up around a slaughterhouse, which for hygienic reasons was originally situated outside the city borders, like those in Paris-Belleville, Berlin-Friedrichshain, or Chicago's Union Stockyards. The first inhabitants, who had to endure this dirty and smelly environment, belonged to the poorest classes. They were mostly country-to-city migrants who had to leave their villages for economic reasons, including the modernization of agriculture after the American invasion of 1898 and the crisis of the sugar industry during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Their buildings were of a low standard, but not significantly different to those in the poor formal areas of Old San Juan. At the same time they paid property tax, their abodes were assessed by state authorities, and buildings were lined up along orderly streets that reflected the grid of Old San Juan.

In La Perla, as in the adjacent Old San Juan, buildings were gradually upgraded and modernized over the course of the twentieth century; overcrowding decreased, and there was a modest rise in wealth. While the crumbling brick and sheet-metal buildings of La Perla might still jar in comparison with the colorful eighteenth-century buildings in the renovated Old Town, the forces that motivated their change over the course of the twentieth century were in principle the same, and their development evidences many commonalities. In this respect La Perla is neither a contrast nor a disturbance, but a neighborhood with both planned and unplanned elements like the Old Town.

La Perla developed over three distinct periods. During the foundation period, c. 1900-1940, the neighborhood grew as an agglomeration of wooden one or two-story structures with pitched roofs, interspersed by some professionally built two-story tenements. During the modernization period, approximately 1940-1980, the tenements disappeared, the share of self-built housing increased, and the wooden buildings were extended, equipped with additional stories, and sometimes replaced by brick or concrete portions. At the same time the population started to decline, from approximately 4,000 inhabitants around 1940 to about 1,500 in 1978. During this period La Perla became subject to clearance and modernization plans, and the area was under constant threat of forced removal. Since 1980, in line with new ideas that had been promoted since the 1960s, official policy goals changed from removal to upgrading. La Perla experienced increasingly solid brick and concrete construction (both upgrades and new buildings)

and improved infrastructure. Community organization also increased, and ownership of buildings and land was transferred to some of the residents. At the same time the number of residents continued to shrink.

### FOUNDATION AND GROWTH (c. 1900-1940)

La Perla had been the location of a slaughterhouse since the eighteenth century due to its geographic specificities. Old San Juan, founded by the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century (and the colonial capital for almost four hundred years), is situated on the western tip of an island (almost a peninsula), separated from the mainland by a small bay that provides a splendid natural harbor. The slaughterhouse – the late-eighteenth-century structure is still standing and now houses a community center – lies on the northern coast at the bottom of a hill, where the open sea would wash away the garbage, and where the hill would protect the adjacent Old San Juan from bad odors. It is thus a typical example of pre-modern sanitary regulation. In 1900 there was a handful of wooden houses with pitched roofs, possibly inhabited by slaughterhouse workers.<sup>5</sup> Their number grew, and by 1913 the area was being built up more or less solidly by wooden houses.<sup>6</sup>

La Perla at the time was by no means an unauthorized encroachment. The tax roll for 1913 lists 23 single-story houses for which property tax was paid. Six were owned by the landowner José D. Riera, the others by individuals who paid rent to Riera for the right to build on his land. In addition, Riera had a two-story *ranchón* (a tenement for several families) near the slaughterhouse, which can be seen in a 1925 aerial photograph (figure 2). The houses had street addresses and house numbers. The tax value of the buildings was significantly lower than that of Old Town properties, but comparable to that of houses in the other extramural areas.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2. Aerial view of La Perla, undated, c. 1925. The area is still significantly less dense than in the 1933 plan (Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Obras Públicas, Serie Propiedad Pública, Caja 256 La Perla).

<sup>5</sup> See photograph by William Sanger, 1900, reprinted in Marvel, *Listen to What They Say*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> La Perla in 1913, photograph in Bearss, *San Juan Fortifications*, reprinted *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Tax Rolls 1912/13, in San Juan Municipality, Departamento de la Hacienda [Revenue Office], *Reparto de Contribuciones (Tax Rolls) Fiscal Year 1912-1951*, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo 'Hacienda'.

Riera was a typical slumlord who profited from the dire housing shortage by renting—not selling—his land for building construction. Next to the La Perla lands, which he acquired around 1910, he also owned the land on which the Miranda slum was built, situated in the Puerta de Tierra area about one kilometer east of La Perla (it was cleared in the 1950s). Such land rentals were as profitable for the owners as they were oppressive for the tenants. A civil servant at the time scorned them as “abnormal” and “worse than exorbitant house rents,” because they gave the landlord extraordinary power.<sup>8</sup> Landlords could and frequently did unilaterally end the contract at the end of the month, or simply raised the rent to a level the tenants were unable to pay. In that case, the tenants were forced to remove their houses—often their only material good—at their own cost or sell them to the landlord at a fraction of their value. The state profited from this system since it taxed both landowners and house owners, at the same rate. In the 2010s the land rent system was still in place, although no longer widely practiced. Since the 1960s, several laws have been passed to protect long-term occupants, and courts have increasingly ruled in their favor when they were threatened with eviction by landowners.

Riera’s two types of houses, the private house and the *ranchón*, exemplified the most common typologies for poor housing that could be found in San Juan. The private house was a rectangular shack of wooden boards, divided inside into two to four rooms. It had a tile or tin roof; the boards were commonly reused. It had a raised floor to protect the inhabitants against moisture, but no insulation against heat, which was particularly noticeable in houses with tin roofs (figure 3).



Figure 3. A private house of a laborer in the ‘Sal si puedes’ neighborhood in Puerta de Tierra, one kilometer east of La Perla, c. 1913 (Puerto Rico Departamento del Trabajo, Report on the Housing Conditions of Laborers in Porto Rico. San Juan, P. R., Bureau of supplies, printing, and transportation, 1914, text by J. C. Bills Jr., p. 12).

<sup>8</sup> Puerto Rico Administration, Departamento del Trabajo [Employment Office], *Report on the Housing Conditions of Laborers in Porto Rico* (San Juan, P. R., Bureau of Supplies, Printing, and Transportation, 1914), 52.



The *ranchón* was a more stable, longitudinal one-story tenement of wood or brick (figure 4). In these buildings, three-room apartments – comprising a living room, bedroom, and kitchen – were placed next to each other. Each apartment had a front door to the living room and a back door to the kitchen on the long sides of the building. These doors were also the only sources of light and ventilation, as the buildings had no windows. The bedroom in the middle thus tended to be particularly dark and airless. Latrines were on the patio. Apartments were hot and stuffy and were usually shared by several families. The *ranchón* was the equivalent of the tenement in Europe and North America: the housing type for the impoverished urban working classes, who suffered from overcrowding and deficient sanitary conditions.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 4. A *ranchón* in Puerta de Tierra, one kilometer east of La Perla, c. 1913. Each of the doors on the left leads to an apartment. One enters the living room through that door, the windowless bedroom is behind, and usually there is a third room (kitchen) with a back door (Puerto Rico Departamento del Trabajo, Report on the Housing Conditions of Laborers in Porto Rico. San Juan, Bureau of supplies, printing, and transportation, 1914, text by J. C. Bills Jr., p. 52).

La Perla's ownership structure began to change during the 1920s. By then Riera had sold all but one of his houses.<sup>10</sup> The owners of the houses usually did not live in them. They paid rent to Riera for the land, but at the same time profited from renting out the houses.

By that time also the formerly unbuilt land outside Riera's property had been built upon. These comprised two areas: Guaypao, immediately to the west of Riera's

<sup>9</sup> There is an extensive literature on nineteenth-century tenements: see for example Miles Horsey, *Tenements and Towers: Glasgow Working Class Housing 1890-1990* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1990); Johann Friedrich Geist and Klaus Kürvers, *Das Berliner Mietshaus*, vol. 2, 1862-1945 (Munich: Prestel, 1984); Diana Linden, "Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York City," *Antiques*, no. 8. 2001.

<sup>10</sup> San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1924/25 (see entry "José Riera").

lands, and the beach zone. The buildings on these lands were squats, as both Guaypao and the beach were public land owned by the Puerto Rican government, which did not authorize construction. The buildings here were simpler than those on Riera's lands, mostly smaller, and containing only one room. They were built and inhabited by the residents and their families.<sup>11</sup> The differences are clearly visible in the 1925 picture.<sup>12</sup> The closer to the beach, the smaller, more unstable, and less desired were the buildings. Exposed to high waves and sewage running down from the upper parts of the settlement, they were precarious abodes and not, as one might see them today, desirable sea-view residences. Such buildings are documented in a 1962 photograph (figure 5). The quality difference corresponded to both geography and legal situation.



Figure 5. Houses on stilts on the beachfront of La Perla in 1962 (Teodoro Torres # Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras, Colección de Fotos del Periódico El Mundo, call number 1039655).

With growth came higher densities of settlement. In the more formal parts closer to the walls of Old San Juan, additional *ranchones* were built during the 1920s and 1930s by other slumlords, who might have acquired portions of the land from Riera. For example, Federico Vázquez was registered as the owner of a *ranchón* with 72 inhabitants, situated next to Riera's land. In addition to his La Perla property, he owned

<sup>11</sup> List of owners and tenants of La Perla, compiled by Departamento del Interior, División de Terrenos Públicos y Archivo, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Departamento de Obras Públicas, Serie Propiedad Pública, Caja 256 "La Perla" 1933.

<sup>12</sup> The picture is kept at Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Fondo Obras Públicas, Serie Propiedad Pública, Caja 256 "La Perla" 1933. The date 1925 is an approximation based on the fact that most, but not all, structures mentioned in the 1933 plan are visible. The area is still slightly less dense; most *ranchones* are not yet there.

three smaller houses in Puerta de Tierra.<sup>13</sup> Another *ranchón*, the two-storey Miró building, was owned by a certain Mercedes Fernández and occupied by 128 people. It was the largest building in La Perla after the slaughterhouse, valued at the considerable sum of \$12,000.<sup>14</sup> The more formal portions thus had significant value: at the time a small wooden house was worth \$300 and the monthly rent for a one-room family space was between three and five dollars.<sup>15</sup> However, the illegally-built small houses in Guaypao and in the beach zone were rented out for profit as well.

In the mid-1930s, La Perla's population reached its all-time high of 3,900 inhabitants. There was a large number of recent migrants, and house moves were frequent.<sup>16</sup> The physical structure of the neighborhood at the time is well documented on a 1933 plan, showing that La Perla had approximately 500 houses.<sup>17</sup> Nearly half of them stood on Riera lands, with others (mostly smaller buildings) on lands owned by the Puerto Rican government, which included the maritime zone. Other landowners were the municipality of San Juan, which owned the slaughterhouse, and two private individuals, who had smaller holdings.<sup>18</sup> La Perla's houses at the time had a significant value, which the tax authorities in 1933 estimated at \$250,000.<sup>19</sup> Landowners also profited from the fact that rents were rising, but property tax remained stable: for example, Riera's lands were valued at the same price in the 1920s and the 1950s.<sup>20</sup>

There is nonetheless evidence of a thriving real estate market. Many house owners owned several buildings. Some had property not only in La Perla but also in the Old Town, and all profited well from the endemic housing shortage. A certain Amador Infanzón rented a large wooden house south of the slaughterhouse (approximately 100 square meters) to 45 tenants, and a smaller one next to it (approximately 50 square meters) to 23 tenants. He also owned property in Puerta de Tierra and in Old San Juan.<sup>21</sup> Some owners also bought and sold plots of land. Only Riera's lands remained in the hands of his family until expropriated in 1980.

Hence, La Perla only partially corresponded to the conventional idea of the informal neighborhood as a squat. The idea of the pioneer who built and subsequently defended his or her own house could be applied only to a minority of owner-occupiers who had invaded the areas beyond the Riera lands. Squatters on the government land (the maritime zone and the areas along the walls) did not pay property tax, but also had to live in the least desirable zones. But even here only a portion lived in their own

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<sup>13</sup> The house was valued at \$2,400 in 1924 and \$1,500 in 1933. San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1924/25; and Departamento del Interior, List of owners and tenants of La Perla, 1933.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1924/25, entry "José Riera." For inhabitants and rents in Puerta de Tierra, see list "Relación de las casas existentes en los sitios denominados 'Riera,' 'Vista Alegre' y 'Miranda,' Puerta de Tierra" [probably 1933], Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Departamento de Obras Públicas, Serie Propiedad Pública, Caja 256 "La Perla" 1933.

<sup>16</sup> 1935 census data in Manuel Pérez, *Estudio Preliminar de Vida en los Arrabales de San Juan* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Rural Rehabilitation Division, 1939), 4. Fifty percent of the inhabitants had lived one year or less in their house when interviewed. About a quarter of the population had lived in the community for less than a year. Ibid., 11.

<sup>17</sup> Puerto Rico Administration, Departamento del Interior, "Plano de las Barriadas Guaypao, La Perla, Nueva Perla y San Miguel," Archivo General de Puerto Rico, 1933.

<sup>18</sup> There are 219 houses on Riera land and 261 on state land. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1925 and 1950, entry "Josefina Bengoechea, viuda de Riera."

<sup>21</sup> Departamento del Interior, List of owners and tenants of La Perla; San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1932/33, and 1950/51, entry "Infanzón, Amador."



buildings; the others had to rent. Yet all the same, on this small-scale level there was a real estate economy; people invested in construction and rented out for profit.<sup>22</sup> The informal element – squatting on wasteland – was thus intertwined with the logic of investment and rental income, which was essentially the same in formal and informal neighborhoods of La Perla.

Living conditions everywhere were harsh. The buildings were not only primitive, but also overcrowded. A 1933 report reveals that most huts were shared by multiple families, and most *ranchones* by 60 to 120 people.<sup>23</sup> Most families had many children. For La Perla at the time there are no data on social structure and employment, but it is likely that they were similar to the Miranda slum one kilometer east in the Puerta de Tierra area, which is documented in a 1933 municipal survey.<sup>24</sup> Here the heads of households had typical working-class occupations: dockworkers, longshoremen, factory workers, domestic employees, washerwomen, as well as lorry drivers, carpenters, construction workers, butchers, and bakers. Many were categorized as unemployed. It is likely that many were also forced to make their living as prostitutes, although direct evidence for this dates only from the 1960s, when it was found that about a third of La Perla families had some history of prostitution.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, a small number of La Perlans were better off, operating small business such as shops and bars. These services were concentrated in the more formal areas on Riera's lands close to the city walls. La Perla's social structure in the 1930s was thus not significantly different from the poor areas of the formal city.

### **MODERNIZATION AND THE THREAT OF CLEARANCE (1940-1980)**

The period during which La Perla was seen as a typical "Third World slum," and threatened by clearance and forced relocation, coincided with the partially successful attempts by the US government to modernize and develop Puerto Rico. They started with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, when Puerto Rico was included in various development projects. Roosevelt's wife Eleanor visited La Perla in 1934. The neighborhood she saw most likely corresponded to that documented in a 1943 picture (figure 6). In the words of a reporter she was "followed by members of the populace clad in rags, naked children and barking dogs [; she was] deeply touched by the desolate scene."<sup>26</sup> As elsewhere in the world the paternalistic policies aimed at improving such conditions resulted in forced relocation. Government-sponsored destruction of poor areas that were classified as "slums" (later "informal neighborhoods") was particularly comprehensive in San Juan.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Pedro Torres owned house no. 23 on the 1933 plan, which he inhabited himself. He also owned an adjacent hut of the same size, which he rented out. Isidra Meléndez, owner of a 32-square metre house, no. 28 on the 1933 plan, did not live in the building but rented it out to 13 people. Both structures were built against the city walls. Departamento del Interior, List of owners and tenants of La Perla, 1933; and Puerto Rico Administration, "Plano de las Barriadas."

<sup>23</sup> Departamento del Interior, List of owners and tenants of La Perla, 1933.

<sup>24</sup> "Relación de las casas existentes."

<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *La Vida*, xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>26</sup> Caption of a photograph dated March 15, 1934, from the Bettmann-Corbis collection, showing Eleanor Roosevelt in La Perla. <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/BE061831/eleanor-roosevelt-touring-poor-area-of-san>.



Figure 6. The main street (now Calle Tiburcio Reyes), looking west, in 1943 (Collection Lucilla and Tom Marvel).

The government agencies in charge of development and modernization (including slum clearance) were the Resettlement Administration and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (both founded in 1935), the Puerto Rico Housing Association (PRHA, founded in 1938), and the Junta de Planificación (Planning Department, founded in 1942). The best known and most comprehensive development initiative in Puerto Rico was Operation Bootstrap (Operación Manos a la Obra), started in 1949 under the newly-formed Puerto Rican autonomous government. There were also continuing New Deal programs with generous funding by federal US authorities.<sup>27</sup> Forty years after Eleanor Roosevelt's visit, all marginal settlements in the city center with the exception of La Perla had been removed. At the same time, in absolute terms, average living standards in the San Juan area as well as in the whole of Puerto Rico had increased significantly. Many forcibly relocated "slum dwellers" found formal abodes in public housing schemes: Puerto Rico's public housing program was the largest in the United States outside New York City.

At the time, US planners foresaw a similar path for Puerto Rico's urban poor as for "slum dwellers" in New York or Chicago: clearance of substandard dwellings, relocation of the inhabitants to a housing project where they would live as tenants and be familiarized with modern standards of living, a gradual improvement of their economic situation through the creation of industrial employment, and their eventual acquisition of a suburban home.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Andrés Mignucci, "Modern Urbanism in Puerto Rico: From Abstract Doctrines to Concrete Landscapes," and Luz Marie Rodríguez, "[Re]visión de la vivienda social en San Juan: notas sobre la arquitectura para el obrero 1930s-1950s," both in *Espacios Ambivalentes: historias y olvidos en la arquitectura social moderna*, edited by Jorge Lizardi and Martin Schwegmann (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2012), 134-5, 167-8.

<sup>28</sup> This is outlined in Marjorie Clark, "Our Own Puerto Rico," *Antioch Review* 4 no. 3 (autumn 1944), 389. See also Rodríguez, "[Re]visión de la Vivienda Social en San Juan," 176.

La Perla was first scheduled for demolition in the 1940s. Unlike other countries at the time the United States remained a guarantor of private property ownership, even at the height of interventionist policy in the mid-twentieth century. Only in rare occasions was compulsory purchase (eminent domain) used as a means to speed up slum clearance. In La Perla local government started its clearance policies by gradually buying up private houses, a very slow process. Clearances eventually began in 1947, in an area southeast of the slaughterhouse that comprised approximately one-fifth of La Perla and was owned by landowners other than the Riera family (figure 7).<sup>29</sup> The plan was to clear all of La Perla and build a park and two-story concrete houses for 600 residents, representing approximately 20 percent of the total inhabitants. The others would have to be distributed to other housing projects in San Juan. The demolition of the entire neighborhood was nonetheless never completed, either because Riera and later his widow resisted government pressure to sell their land, or simply because of bureaucratic inefficiency. Moreover, the construction of substitute housing was delayed time and again. The whole project was eventually scrapped in 1964, when, after almost twenty years, the officials recognized what any experienced construction professional would have been able to tell them right away: that the construction of formal houses on the steep cliffs of La Perla would have been extremely costly.<sup>30</sup> Plans to relocate La Perlans to the La Puntilla area on the southern shores of Old San Juan also failed because of the cumbersome bureaucracy.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, La Perlans were becoming more and more vocal in expressing their desire to remain.<sup>32</sup>

During the modernization period the “slum discourse” that focused on misery and crime was particularly strong. This is evidenced in newspaper headlines such as “La Perla, Focus of Dirt and Misery” (1944),<sup>33</sup> “Slum Elimination Program being Started” (1944),<sup>34</sup> “La Perla, the Gloomy Slum, is Swept Away by the Wave of Progress” (1947),<sup>35</sup> “Plan to Move La Perla Residents into Social Housing” (1957),<sup>36</sup> “Slum Clearance Intensified” (1961),<sup>37</sup> and “Fight Against Illegal Construction” (1968).<sup>38</sup> The “slum discourse” promoted a paternalistic narrative that focused on misery, dirt, and an immoral lifestyle evidenced by free unions and early sexual relations; it dwelt as well on criminality, focusing on violence, theft and drug use.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Rotkin, “Sector of La Perla Slum Cleared in Preparation for Insular Housing Project”, 1947, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Archivo Fotográfico, Cb22-6302. See also “Un Parque en La Perla,” *El Mundo* November 22, 1956 and “Hogares Continúa Gestión para Compra Propiedades en La Perla,” *El Mundo* October 29, 1947.

<sup>30</sup> Alfredo Margenat, “Gobierno Descarta Renovar Sector Residencial de La Perla,” *El Mundo* June 26, 1964.

<sup>31</sup> David Ahlers, “La Perla Residents Say ‘La Puntilla or Rebuild Here’ – Scrapped Puntilla Plan Draws Ire,” *San Juan Star* October 27, 1969; Rubén Arrieta, “La Perla: Se Niegan a que le Cambien la Cara,” *El Nuevo Día* November 26, 1978; “San Juan necesita a La Perla para vivir,” *El Nuevo Día* December 11, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> See demonstration against demolitions, photographed by Mandín Rodríguez. Collection from the newspaper *El Mundo*, Biblioteca Digital Puertorriqueña of the University of Puerto Rico, call number 103971. <http://www.bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu>.

<sup>33</sup> A. Cruz, “La Perla Foco de Suciedad, Miseria,” *El Mundo* July 9, 1944.

<sup>34</sup> “Activan el programa para la eliminación de los arrabales” *El Mundo* May 18, 1944.

<sup>35</sup> José Babosa, “La Perla, sombrío arrabal, cae al embate del progreso” *El Universal*, November 8, 1947.

<sup>36</sup> P. Hernández, “Habitantes de La Perla Plan es llevarlos a caseríos” *El Mundo* March 13, 1957.

<sup>37</sup> “CRUV intensifica saneamiento arrabal” *El Mundo* October 20, 1961.

<sup>38</sup> A. Miranda, “Combatirá obras clandestinas” *El Mundo* November 27, 1968.



Figure 7. Aerial view of La Perla with cleared area, looking southeast. The slaughterhouse is the large structure in the middle. On the left of it one can see the Miró building (Charles Rotkin, 1948, Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Archivo Fotográfico, Cc45-X6570).

At the same time La Perla began to be analysed by social scientists. The best known study, *La Vida* by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1965), described La Perlans as trapped in a “culture of poverty,” a subculture of marginalized people within a comparatively wealthy society, which was being transmitted over the generations and that tended to resist development and change.<sup>39</sup> Arguably this diagnosis of entrenched non-development was influential in the discontinuation of state-sponsored modernization programs and the status of Puerto Rico as a “social laboratory.”<sup>40</sup> However Lewis himself was anything but deprecating about La Perlans and stressed their networks of mutual help and support. Rather, his concept of persistent social marginalization went with a fundamental criticism of the capitalist system that provoked this situation in the first place. But his diagnosis was unpopular both among development scholars and La Perlans themselves, who felt that they were being misrepresented as somewhat less-worthy citizens.

A more positive vision—and at the same time more in line with the capitalist ideal of entrepreneurialism—was developed by the anthropologist Helen Safa, who had studied two other San Juan neighborhoods since the late 1950s, and in her 1974 book *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico* she stressed the inhabitants’ resourcefulness,

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *La Vida*. Lewis received much criticism for his book. This may be explained by the moral standards at the time. Many regarded it as offensive that Lewis was not bothered by what he described as the norm in La Perla: sex with different partners and couples in free union.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Lapp, “The Rise and Fall of Puerto Rico as a Social Laboratory, 1945-65,” *Social Science History* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 171.



cooperation, and self-reliance.<sup>41</sup> These aspects were celebrated at the same time by the British architect John Turner, and subsequently throughout the world, leading to new ways of viewing informal architecture.<sup>42</sup>

During the “modernization period” La Perla also experienced gradual upgrading. The social structure was still similar to that in the 1930s: dockworkers, longshoremen, washerwomen and domestic workers, but now also a high percentage of restaurant workers (more than half of all employed men and women in the neighborhood), and, as in all poor neighborhoods, the drug trade and prostitution. There were more and more formal elements. There was an electricity supply since at least the 1940s.<sup>43</sup> A Catholic chapel and a Pentecostal church opened in the 1950s. In 1953, there was a post office and a school on the main street, which at the time was already paved. At least 27 shops and bars in La Perla were formal in the sense that their owners were registered in the tax rolls and paid property tax (among them 14 small caf  s, 11 general stores, and a jukebox spot).<sup>44</sup> Buildings tended to be more solid than they had been a few decades earlier (figure 8).



Figure 8. Calle Tiburcio Reyes from the city walls, looking east, in 1978. The street was prolonged towards the slaughterhouse in the following years. The diagonal structure on the right side is the ruined last ranch  n in La Perla (Collection Lucilla and Tom Marvel).

<sup>41</sup> Safa, *Urban Poor of Puerto Rico*.

<sup>42</sup> John F. C. Turner, “The Squatter Settlement: Architecture That Works,” *Architectural Design* 38 no. 3 (1968): 355. Other authors who pioneered the new view on informal neighbourhoods include Charles Stokes, “A Theory of Slums,” *Land Economics* 38 no. 3 (1962), 187-197; Charles Abrams, *Man’s Struggle for Shelter in an Urbanizing World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964); as well as the authors mentioned in the first paragraph.

<sup>43</sup> Power poles are clearly visible on a postcard titled “Barriada La Perla in San Juan, 1943,” Collection Lucilla and Tom Marvel. Cables to many individual houses are visible in the photograph by Rotkin, “Sector of La Perla Slum Cleared in Preparation for Insular Housing Project.”

<sup>44</sup> San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1950/51.

The slaughterhouse closed in the 1950s, diminishing the noise and bad smell. In the early 1960s, a library (1963), nursery school (1964), community center, and health clinic opened. A basketball court was built near the walls on the plots cleared in 1947.

As with the local economy, the changes in ownership structure are hard to capture in terms of a formal-informal distinction. There was a clear trend towards modern dwelling arrangements, that is, one family per self-contained apartment or house, and towards owner-occupation without tenancy liabilities to the landowner. The share of homeowner households increased from 35 percent in 1938 to 42 percent in 1977.<sup>45</sup> The number of *ranchones* shrank progressively. The largest, the Miro building, was vacated in the 1950s and torn down soon after. The last, situated in the Guaypao sector, was demolished in the late 1970s.

The most significant change in legal terms occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, but unfortunately left few detailed records. In the early 1950s, Riera's widow Josefina Bengoechea still paid full property tax, which suggests that she received a substantial amount of rent income. In 1980, however, her land was expropriated due to accumulated property tax debts, and apparently with no resistance, and the land was given to La Perla homeowners.<sup>46</sup> The most likely explanation is that Bengoechea had died without heirs, so that there was no one left to collect the rent, and the default in property tax over many years strengthened the case for expropriation. That means that at some point after the mid 1950s La Perlans became "informal" in the sense that they turned from slumlord tenants into squatters and squatters' tenants, an unclear legal situation which was further complicated by the continuous threat of clearance. On the other hand they became increasingly "formal" in the sense of enjoying stable buildings, a breadth of services, and integration into the wider economy of the city.

In the 1970s the official long-term "slum" goal for La Perla changed from eradication to upgrading and consolidation. It was the time when planning all over the world shifted from demolition to on-site rehabilitation. La Perla was no exception.

The main actors in the new policy were regional authorities—the Puerto Rican Department of Housing and the Puerto Rican Architects' Association—who in 1978 sponsored an "integrated development competition" to determine a master plan.<sup>47</sup> The competition was supported by Governor Carlos Romero-Barceló of the center-right Progressive Democratic Party, who had been mayor of San Juan for eight years before becoming governor in 1977, and who was familiar with La Perla, as it is situated only about 200 meters from City Hall. A first prize was not awarded, but the plan by runner-up Tom Marvel was largely implemented.<sup>48</sup> Marvel's scheme was based on close collaboration with the residents, conservation of existing structures, and infrastructural improvements. The Corporación de Renovación Urbana y Vivienda (CRUV), now a

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<sup>45</sup> In some other informal settlements in San Juan in 1938, the number was over 80 percent. See, for example, Pérez, *Estudio Preliminar*, 26. For La Perla numbers, see Departamento de Vivienda, Study on La Perla, 1977, quoted in Puerto Rico Administration, Departamento de la Vivienda [Housing Department], *Concurso para el Desarrollo del Vecindario La Perla*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> In 1951, the Riera widow still paid \$930 property tax. San Juan Municipality, Tax Rolls 1950/51 (the last year available at the archive). After that there is no mention of land rent in any report.

<sup>47</sup> Puerto Rico Administration, *Concurso para el Desarrollo del Vecindario La Perla*.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Marvel et al., *La Perla* (San Juan, 1978) [competition entry by Thomas Marvel and Pedro Miranda Corrada, each in combination with engineers and consultants, which included Rafael Pumarada, Antonio Cobian, Lucilla Marvel, and José Villamil], collection Lucilla and Tom Marvel.



branch of the Housing Department and in previous decades a municipal institution that directed slum clearance programs, set up an office in La Perla in the same year, and Marvel and his wife (the urban planner Lucilla Marvel) were hired as consultants.



Figure 9. Playground and renovated houses on Calle Tiburcio Reyes, 2013 (author).

The somewhat surprising fact that a center-right governor rather than a leftist one promoted participation and upgrading, paralleled the political maneuvering in Britain, France, and Germany, for example, where *tabula rasa* (blank slate) programs had been promoted by socialists/social democrats in the 1960s, and were a decade later stopped by unlikely coalitions between radical activists and conservatives.<sup>49</sup> In the La Perla case there was also a great deal of pragmatism. Since the *tabula rasa* plans had not yielded any visible effect on the La Perla neighborhood in two decades (aside from the small area cleared in 1947 that in the 1960s was used for a basketball court), Puerto Rican politicians tried an architectural competition. Given a generation of John Turner- and John Habraken-inspired architects and planners, there was no entry that proposed large-scale demolitions. Puerto Rico at the time also boasted other voices favorable to informal neighborhoods, such as the writers René Marqués and José Luis González and the Austrian-born scholar Leopold Kohr.<sup>50</sup>

Over the following years the Housing Department financed measures including the demolition of the precarious beachfront houses and the relocation of their

<sup>49</sup> For Berlin see for example Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: A Global History of Mass Housing* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 66-68; for Glasgow, Florian Urban, *The New Tenement: Residences in the Inner City since 1970* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 106-8.

<sup>50</sup> Manuel Bermúdez, “De la *tábula rasa* a la rehabilitación del barrio: puesta en escena de un nuevo modelo de la vivienda social,” in *Espacios Ambivalentes: historias y olvidos en la arquitectura social moderna*, edited by Jorge Lizardi and Martin Schwegmann (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2012), 202-227.

inhabitants to other La Perla houses, the construction of a road along the coast, and sewers and streetlights. These different interventions contributed to an overall improvement. It was generally held that these improvements were undertaken with the close participation of “the community,” but given the ongoing decrease in La Perla’s population (particularly its tenant population), one can assume that such participation was largely limited to the home-owning portion of La Perla residents.

Most importantly, land ownership was transferred to the inhabitants. In 1980, the estate of José Riera was expropriated (the rest of the land was already owned by the state).<sup>51</sup> In the same year the government issued the first land deeds to local homeowners, based on a plot-plan worked out by the Marvels. There was a total of about 350 homeowners in La Perla at the time; over the following years these were granted land ownership. This process took several decades and was not entirely completed by the early 2010s.<sup>52</sup>

The land transfer was designed to support the self-determination of a marginalized community, carried out on the basis of a law that secured the squatters’ right to remain in their homes.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, like many such measures worldwide, it raised significant questions about social justice.

La Perla’s “bottom-up” renovation was far from being egalitarian, however, as it represented a significant subsidy to the most privileged third of its residents: the homeowners. These were the ones who inhabited and owned a house (although not the land on which it was built) and rented out to the other two thirds of La Perla residents, whose rental contracts were mostly informal and had no legal protection. The renovation legalized La Perla as a community, but protected only this minority from eviction. The legalization also set the course for future gentrification. As there were no conditions on the land titles they could be sold at will to anyone ready to invest into a favorably-located neighborhood with an improving reputation and development potential. Several large houses were built in the early 2000s on combined plots bought up from different owners (figure 9). These had presumably been owned by long-term La Perla residents, which also shows that by that time some La Perlans — through legal or illegal activities — had acquired a level of wealth that allowed them to build multi-story structures similar in size to suburban villas or houses in the Old Town. The “slum upgrading” thus did not, in any clear-cut way, promote the rights of the poor against those of the rich. Rather, it allowed some more- and some less-wealthy residents to stay, and some more- and some less-wealthy to profit from a developing real estate market. At the same time the resident population of La Perla shrank to a bare minimum.

While the authorities in theory accepted La Perla’s right to exist they still followed a carrot-and-stick policy. Talk was often supportive and action dismissive.<sup>54</sup> The final crackdown against the drug traffic was carried out in 2011. In a carefully concerted police raid combined with a water and power shutdown, 114 La Perlans were arrested on drug and weapons charges—almost half of the population at the time.

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<sup>51</sup> Lucilla Marvel, conversation with the author, November 22, 2013; see also Marvel, *Listen to What They Say*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> Out of an estimated 350 homeowners, 120 received land titles by 2000. Ibid., 159.

<sup>53</sup> The land titles were awarded under Law 132 of 1975, which legalized squats if they had occurred before 1973.

<sup>54</sup> María Vera, “Bajo Amenaza,” *El Vocero* September 14, 2007; María Miranda, “La Perla Residents face Specter of Eviction,” *Puerto Rico Daily Sun* July 13, 2011.

Among those arrested was community leader Jorge Gómez, locally known as “Truck Face,” who was sentenced to thirty years in prison for drug trafficking.<sup>55</sup> Gómez had been the elected president of the Junta de Vecinos (Residents Council) since 2007 and was assisted by pro bono lawyers in his fight for permanence for the La Perla community.<sup>56</sup> Activists thus saw the police action as a pretext to break their resistance, and the drug charges as an excuse to malign the neighborhood and expel its residents.

The raid was the culmination of a clean-up policy all over Old San Juan, which was directed against drug crime and petty theft, and that had over the years gradually increased police presence in the community. With the Old Town façades shining in bright colors since the turn of the millennium, and both tourists and better-off locals enjoying a greater feeling of safety, La Perla was the last reminder of the rough-and-run-down Old San Juan. Now this portion was being cleaned as well, and the authorities were committed to using the full force of the law.

### **CONCLUSION: LA PERLA IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

The century-long development of La Perla in both formal and informal ways shows the inadequacy of the conventional formal-informal dichotomy. The La Perla “slum” developed in close relation with, and largely along the same principles as, the adjacent formal neighborhoods of Old San Juan. La Perla’s urban development also evidences strong continuities. The comparison of the maps of 1933, 1978, and 2013 shows the process of steady consolidation.<sup>57</sup> At the same time the population had shrunk to about 150 in 2013, compared to close on 4,000 people in the 1930s. Between 1933 and 1978, the number of houses remained stable, at approximately 500, despite the fact that the population shrank to a sixth of its original size. This suggests a rise in quality of life because of less overcrowding. By 2013, the most precarious houses on the beachfront had disappeared. Additional houses were demolished for infrastructural improvements and the paving of connector streets, leaving a total of only 378 houses. The 2013 plan shows that in the areas on the upper slope — the former Riera lands—the ground plan remained almost unchanged over the last century.

In its different sectors, La Perla continued to develop in ways that were already discernable in the 1920s. The Riera lands, which already in 1933 were the most “formal,” continued to be the best-kept areas. Guaypao in the west and the beachfront areas (which in the 1930s, with their large numbers of self-built structures erected without permission on state-owned land, were the most “informal” elements in the community) continued to be the least stable. They contained the most ruins in 1978, and they tended to be left out of the legalization procedures from 1981 onwards.

La Perla in the early 2010s looked very different than it had in previous decades. New amenities had opened in the 1980s and 1990s. They include a Head Start Center (educational program for young children), a medical clinic, a senior citizens center, and a playground.<sup>58</sup> The shops and bars, some of them existing for decades, are well kept

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<sup>55</sup> Cynthia López, “Denuncian un plan articulado para desalojar La Perla,” *El Nuevo Día* July 13, 2011; Rut Tellado, “Residentes defienden a la Perla,” *El Nuevo Día*, July 11, 2011; Limarys Suárez, “Fallo de culpabilidad para Cara de Truck,” *El Nuevo Día*, October 18, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> “Organizan junta vecinos La Perla,” *El Vocero* September 21, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Puerto Rico Administration, “Plano de las Barriadas.” La Perla Building Map with state of building and number of floors, 1978, Collection Lucilla and Tom Marvel. La Perla Building Map, 2013, Taller de Estudios Graduados “Arquitectura y Comunidad,” Universidad de Puerto Rico.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Martinez, “La Perla: Poor but Still Beautiful to Residents,” *The San Juan Star* September 6, 1998; Yaritza Rivas, “Estreno entre brincos y risas infantiles,” *El Nuevo Mundo* December 14, 2008.

and look like those in other lower-class neighborhoods in San Juan. On Saturday nights some of them attract youth from all over the city. Most houses are made of brick and concrete. Streets are paved, and instead of the previous chaotic mesh of electric wires one finds orderly posts and cables. There are ruins and structures with boarded-up doors and windows, but in between these stand renovated and well-kept buildings. There are still children in worn-out clothes running in the streets, but significantly fewer than in historic photographs. The image of La Perla as a place of danger and crime is slowly crumbling. Near one of the access roads there is a shiny sign that reads “Bienvenidos - Comunidad La Perla – Comunidad Histórica,” and street vendors in Old San Juan now sell self-dyed shirts that read “La Perla” and “Made in Guaypao.”<sup>59</sup>

La Perla is still a tight-knit community ready to defend its homes against the onslaught of government officials and foreign investors, but the number of residents has shrunk to less than a tenth of its 1930s population, and its most vocal leaders are in jail. Most residents who were not homeowners are gone. Somewhat surprisingly, those who remain do not seem too worried about gentrification. During a community meeting in August 2013, several inhabitants embraced the idea of bringing more tourists to their neighborhood.<sup>60</sup> The external appearance of La Perla is far from that of gentrifying areas in New York or London, but the course towards upgrading, embellishment and aestheticization, and the influx of different and more affluent residents, is set to continue.

La Perla demonstrates how difficult it is to uphold the distinction between “formal” and “informal” neighborhoods. La Perla has always been poorer than the adjacent “formal” Old San Juan. But in both architectural and social terms there is little categorical distinction. Architectural forms were similar, economic relations close, and the population in both areas evolved according to the same parameters. As a category of analysis, “informal neighborhood” thus seems to be riddled by similar inadequacies as the derogatory term “slum” that it had once replaced. Rather than a description of a socio-architectural reality, “informal” has to be considered a time-specific idea, which can effectively be used in the framework of mid-twentieth-century modernization, but which in more recent contexts loses much of its explanatory power.

The upgrading and consolidation of La Perla, as patchy and selective as it has been, had the positive effect that it followed a “postmodern” approach to planning rather than the dominant Puerto Rican and US model of the car-oriented and low-density suburb. The poverty and marginalization of its inhabitants notwithstanding, La Perla shows many aspects of twenty-first-century-style sustainable urbanism. It is a dense, largely pedestrianized, family-oriented neighborhood, small, but with a strong sense of community, active neighborhood organizations, and hybrid spaces for gardening and small-animal keeping, children’s play, and combined workshops/residences. In this

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<sup>59</sup> Author’s observations, October 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Author’s notes, community meeting on August 23, 2013 at the former slaughterhouse.

sense La Perla hardly corresponds to the stereotypes of a “slum,” but rather embodies many characteristics promoted by contemporary planners and activists.

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