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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SAN JUAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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Abstract

On October 12 of 1992 tall ships from all over the world came to celebrate the Christopher Columbus Grand Regatta in Old San Juan as part of the festivities of the Fifth Centenary of the Discovery of the New World. This magnum event took place along the walls of the magnificent masonry fortification of San Felipe del Morro, the most important Spanish colonial era military outpost in the Americas. This massive fortress, designed to protect the city and the bay of San Juan, is part of the United States National Park System. With the United Nations designation of San Juan National Historic Zone as a World Heritage Site for its exceptional cultural value, El Morro fortress has joined the ranks of renowned places like Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, Egypt’s Pyramids of Giza, Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley, and India’s Taj Mahal Historic Park. This along with the flourishing heritage tourism industry in Old San Juan has turned El Morro into one of the most visited monuments of the city.

The Puerto Rican Tourism Company’s consciousness about the global iconography of the El Morro sentry boxes encouraged them to take it as the official corporate logo. This was in response to an aggressive media campaign to promote a new form of industry known as heritage tourism. This symbol has been associated not only with the proud and strong Spanish heritage of the city and its residents, but with the entire Island. Puerto Rico was among the first and the last Spanish colonies in the Americas. El Morro has become an
icon that symbolizes the “vernacular” Puerto Rican postcolonial culture. This neocolonialism perspective is in sharp contrast with the views of the US Park Service and the World Heritage Commission in which the old and beloved city represents the Spanish conquest and dominion of the Americas through the systematic extermination-forceful assimilation of the native cultures (civilizations). In addition to the current American political identity of the residents of the US Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the district of Old San Juan, El Morro, has become an icon that affirms the existence of a Puerto Rican culture that struggles to survive under the unequal socio-economical and political pressures of their new mother country (USA). Through a more thorough examination of scholastic research and peer review data, this paper will strive to decode and place the symbolism-iconography of this World Heritage Site within the context of a postcolonial and neocolonial theoretical framework.

**Historic Preamble**

Christopher Columbus discovered the Island of San Juan Bautista on November 19, 1493, during his second voyage to the New World. The original inhabitants of the Island, the Taino Indians, called it Boriquen, which in the Arawak language means the land of the almighty lord. It was not until 1506 that the Spaniard Juan Ponce de Leon, an ambitious lieutenant under Columbus command, took the initiative to colonize the Island. In 1508, the Caparra Village was founded by Ponce de Leon on the north coast of the Island. Soon, the inhabitants of the second European settlement in the Americas decided to move to a better location, since the original site selected for the village was a swamp. The village was reestablished just across the bay on a rocky islet and renamed Puerto Rico (Rich Port).

The imperialist political agenda of Spain in 1533 established the importance of the city of Puerto Rico to defend the interests of the Spanish Crown in the Americas. Its valuable geographic location as the eastern foremost Island of the Caribbean’s Greater Antilles, and extraordinary tropical weather conditions, forced the Spanish Crown to heavily protect the city from continuous attacks through the improvements and construction of fortresses and walls. These attacks were driven by the desire of many European countries to gain possession of the Island from Spain. The city of Puerto Rico, now renamed San Juan, was a strategic point of commerce between the New and Old World. The Bay of San Juan is the largest and deepest natural harbor in the Caribbean Basin. This makes it the first port that any vessel that crossed the
Atlantic Ocean could dock in. This was a seductive commerce instrument that the Spanish Crown was reluctant to loose.

The Spanish Colonial Model (1492-1898)

Puerto Rico, for more than 400 years, was a military stronghold for the Spanish Crown in the Americas. Only citizens who were loyal to the Spanish crown were allowed to migrate to the Island. This demographic distinction makes Puerto Rico unique among the Spanish colonies in the Americas. The Puerto Rico colonists were of direct Spaniard lineage with no desire for separation from the Mother Country. At the time, all the indigenous people were extinct or fully assimilated by the Spanish culture. The city of San Juan took the character of a major Spanish city in direct reflection of the dominant demography. African slaves were also brought to the Island, to aid in agriculture but not at the scale of the continental Americas or neighboring islands. This third demographic group also was assimilated by the Spaniard dominant culture.

This third demographic group also was assimilated by the Spaniard dominant culture. The mixing of the surviving Taíno, the Europeans, and Africans created a new group called Criollos. Although, of not pure Spaniard lineage, the Criollos also became assimilated by the Spaniard dominant culture who emphasized above all; loyalty to the Spanish Crown, Roman Catholic faith, and praise in high value about all Spanish culture. The landscape and architecture of San Juan was molded from the “Mother Country” to reflect this policy, thus reinforcing San Juan's citizens loyalty and direct lineage to the Crown.
Several scholars have argued that this colonial model explained why, during the Spanish colonial era, the citizens of Puerto Rico never had a strong desire to seek independence from the mother country. Although there were some small scale attempts by *Criollos* to seek some form of representation and to gain local affairs control, these events were never at a scale to be considered threatening to the Spanish Crown control of the Island.

**The American Colonial Model (1898 to present)**

In 1898, the end of the Hispanic-American War left the United States in possession of Puerto Rico. At the time, the United States was commencing to emerge as a new western power in the region. The American politicians of the era were strong proponents of exporting to the world the democratic American values of freedom and liberty. The United States, a former colony to a monarch-imperialist system, was strongly committed to aid any struggling nation in the Americas to seek their own sovereignty and to end the European control in the region. Puerto Rico was their ideal candidate to experiment the new “Americanization” since it was the last colony in the Americas of a monarch-imperialist system. As noted by Laurie Johnston, on her paper entitled, *The Road to Our America: The United States in Latin America and the Caribbean:*
With the military occupations of Cuba and Puerto Rico, US capital, business and culture accelerated their march southward, embarking on programmes of ‘Americanization’ and their infiltration and transformation of the local economies that would enhance US influence in the region. (Ryan 2000, 41-42)

Puerto Rico now became the testing ground to export all that is good about the US and the American way of life. The entire Island socio-economical model of the past was completely discarded and replaced by a new “progressive” model. The Island, which was once known as the poorhouse of the Caribbean, became overnight the second richest “country” in the Americas. Industrialization, replaces the agrarian society of the 1800’s, and a new emerging middle class was born. Education, income, health, and the way of life were elevated to match the “Mainland US” standards. The landscape and architecture of the Island now were molded from the new “Mother Country” to reflect this policy, thus reinforcing the Island’s citizens desired to become more American.

Figure 3. View of Downtown San Juan. Photo by the author, 1997.

The year 1952, marks the date that a new form of government was born. The creation of the US Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico de los Estados Unidos de Norte America), a non-incorporated territory
of the US, seeks to give local affairs autonomy to the new American citizens of the Island, but under the direct control of the US Congress. Since its creation; this new form of government, constitutionally unique, has become the source of political unrest, socio-economical disparity, controversy, and anti-constitutional validity. Scholars have argued that the territorial clause governing the Island (unincorporated US territory) has turned Puerto Rico into an American perpetual colony. Puerto Rico was not a colony as defined in the American historic context, which is to serve a foreign empire that directly controls and dominates the vernacular-indigenous societies. The colonial definition that best illustrated the Commonwealth status is that offered under a neocolonialism theoretical framework. That is; the foreign empire seeks to influence a non-western society through alliances with local factions who favor friendly enterprises with the foreign entity. Accordingly, neocolonialism as defined by The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (AHD):

Control of former colonies by colonial powers, especially by economic means: “By neocolonialism we mean the practice of granting a sort of independence with the concealed intention of making the liberated country a client state.” [Alex Quaison-Sackey]. (AHD, 880)

Scholars may argue, from the historic rhetoric perspective, that the US is not a foreign empire, but by careful examination of the constitutional definition of the Commonwealth (unincorporated US territory clause), Puerto Rico is sort of “sovereign and independent” in the matters of local affairs as long as their actions are not against the best interest of the US Congress.

After more than 100 years since Puerto Rico became a US territory, the American influence over the Island is extremely strong and symbiotic. The neocolonialist relationships between Puerto Rico and the US have influenced every single aspect of the daily life. Puerto Rico today, in many ways, feels, looks, acts, and even smells American, but has maintained its unique Hispanic identity. Major efforts have been made to preserve anything that is left of Puerto Rico’s Hispanic colonial identity. The Hispanic landscapes and architecture have played an important political role in providing a point of reference for cultural identity while embracing the new American way of life. Scholars have argued that the issue of maintaining Puerto Rico’s unique Hispanic identity is what has kept the citizens of the Island fully moving forward to turn Puerto Rico into the 51st State of the Union, thus favoring the Status Quo (Commonwealth), and completely rejecting independence (sovereignty). As
noted by, Robert Aldrich and John Connell in their book entitled, *The Last Colonies*:

Puerto Rico finally held a referendum on its status in November 1993; 48 percent of the voters favoured the commonwealth, 46 per cent preferred statehood, and a mere 4 per cent supported independence. The tiny proportion of votes for independence option – in a record 80 per cent turnout – made it unlikely that Puerto Rico could in the foreseeable future separate from the United States. (Aldrich Connell 1998, 37)

Recently the US Federal Supreme Court has concluded and stated that the current Status Quo (Commonwealth) of the Island is not a valid form of government to be included in future referendums because it is anti-constitutional. The recent Presidential Report on the Status of the Island, that embodied 3 presidential administrations (Bush Senior, Clinton, and GW Bush), recommend that the next referendum to solve the status of the Island will include only two options; Statehood or Independence. This 2009-2010 planned referendum will be the first one in the history of Puerto Rico - US Congress relations that the Commonwealth Status it’s not an option. Recent media public polls among US Congressmen, politicians, the citizens of Puerto Rico, and the general American public favored the idea of making Puerto Rico the 51st State of the Union. In the history of the US only two unincorporated territories have been completely assimilated by the US; Hawaii and Alaska. Current trends indicate that Puerto Rico may become the third.

**Iconography**

Heritage tourism has played an important role in the transformation of modern San Juan. Nevertheless, the preservation of the national patrimony has created a series of controversial issues among historians, educators, common citizens, developers, businesspersons, bankers, politicians, investors, and tourists. The iconography of sentry boxes has created a stereotypical image of San Juan. Hollywood continuously uses the Old San Juan district as the stage for historic era movies, totally ignoring the ultra modern and tropical skyline that rises above and in the background of the sentry boxes. The reality is that Old San Juan is one of the 7 districts of this Caribbean mega-polis of 2 million inhabitants, but the perpetual imagery preconceived in the minds of the tourist is the old palatial walls and sentry boxes. This imagery well used by tourist related industries propaganda, is in conflict with the educational purposes and the preservation programs of Old San Juan. The historians’ efforts to preserve
the old city core, is driven by a desire to protect for future generations, an invaluable historical landmark. It’s not enough to preserve history by writing the accounts of the facts, but by preserving the land, the instruments, and the buildings where such events took place. On the contrary, there is a group of people who argue that developers have turned Old San Juan into an historic theme park, in which most of the tourists who arrive just want to enjoy the sightseeing of the old city core without any interest in learning the history of old buildings and the history of the people of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, the benefit of the tourism industry has contributed to the preservation and restoration of District of Old San Juan, if the tourist learns nothing at all. As noted by David T. Herbert on his book, *Heritage, Tourism and Society*:

Heritage tourism is now big business. In economic and entrepreneurial terms it is one of the major success stories of recent years. At a time of declining industrial activity and rising unemployment in Western society, heritage tourism has provided an alternative form of enterprise, creating jobs and generating wealth for local economies. (Herbert 1995, 11)

The revenues generated by tourism were instrumental in funding the restoration and preservation efforts. The management of the restoration-preservation efforts of the Old San Juan district also became a model of good partnership between the public and private sectors. A model that has been copied by several governments’ tourism companies of nearby Islands and similar US mainland cities.

The success in rescuing the Old San Juan district produced a “renaissance” among scholars about what it means be Puerto Rican. After all, Puerto Rico, as previously stated, has now been “Americanized.” Anyone who attempts to preserve the past (Spanish Colony) was regarded as someone who is against progress. Manuel Mendez-Guerrero stated in his book: *San Juan de Puerto Rico*. 


The year 1955, marks a date of great importance for the national Puerto Rican culture. That year, the governor of Puerto Rico created the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. The Commonwealth government compromised for the first time, making use of this new instrument, to preserve and encourage in all its forms the Puerto Rican culture. One of the first priorities of this new program was to launch in a novel and dynamic program the conservation and restoration of the national monuments and historic zones in the country, especially the ones in San Juan. Programs of this nature were not popular at the time, and few cities promoted. In San Juan there was a vast majority of people convinced that if we preserved the old buildings we are indeed stopping the progress, and destroying the evolution of architecture. The commercial banks were rejecting any loan designated to restore an old brick structure of more than 200 years. The owners were encouraged by the banking industry to sell the structures at a lower taxable rate. (Mendez-Guerrero 1989, 22)

The neocolonialist relationship of Puerto Rico and the US prompted, momentarily speaking, a shift of cultural attitudes among the San Juan citizens to discard the old (Spanish heritage) and embrace the new (American heritage) in light of progress. Time proves that both preservation and progress are equally important for the evolution of culture and societies.
Figure 5. View of Old San Juan. Photo by the author, 1997.

The palatial walls, the fortress, and sentry boxes of Old San Juan symbolize the many aspects of Puerto Rican culture. It represents the strong and proud Hispanic heritage of the American citizens of the Island. The tourists might see, in those walls, the imperialist dominion of the Spanish Crown in the Americas, but the residents of the city might see the high value that Spain gave to the inhabitants of the Island. These contradictory views of the Old San Juan district, exemplified a postcolonial perspective among two distinctive viewers and their own critical reasoning context. To define the postcolonial perspective in simple terms is; why the grass is greener on the other side or what is beautiful? Postcolonialism as defined on the book, Post-Colonialism: A Very Short Introduction, by Robert J. C. Young states that;

Since the early 1980’s, Postcolonialism has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed. What does that means? It means turning the world upside down. It means looking from the other side of the photograph, experiencing how differently things look when you live in Baghdad or Benin rather than Berlin or Boston, and understanding why. It means realizing that when the western people look at the non-western
world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions that the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the west actually feel and perceive themselves. (Young 2003, 2)

Postcolonialism offers a way to see the world from the perspective of the non-western cultures (Asia, Africa, and Latin America). Today the western world is composed of European Estates and North America. Postcolonialism, allowed seeing the world through the eyes of the vernacular culture that was oppressed and silenced by the direct control of a dominant foreign military-economical empire. To see the Old San Juan district from the perspective of the San Juaneros is to acknowledge; Spain’s high value and pride to the Island and its citizens, or the military-monarchic fist control views of the American Tourist who based their views from their own historic experience. The post-colonial theoretical framework, allowed examining the meaning and symbolism of the Old San Juan district from a different perspective. This romantic perspective of the Old San Juan district by the San Juaneros is rooted on a Spanish colonial era policy known as Royal Grace Issue.

The strong Spanish heritage, which can be traced for more than 400 years, is a result of a political strategy in which the Spanish Crown put in practice in Puerto Rico. As noted by Adolfo de Hostos in his book, Historia de San Juan, Ciudad Murada:

The increasingly favored idea of the Crown to turn it into the “forefront and vanguard” of the colonial empire in the Americas, a stronghold for the expansion of the Roman Catholic Faith, and of least importance the economic development of the Island, the select policy took steps further to attract nobility and aristocracy, natural defenders of the Monarchy; exclusion of admission of foreigners, Spanish enemies, commerce competitors, opposers of the Catholic Faith and propagandist of Protestantism (Hostos 1948, 183)

This policy known as Real Cedula de Gracia (Royal Graces Issue), granted the citizens of San Juan and Puerto Rico a large concentration of honorable Spanish family lineage, nobility and aristocracy, excluding any group of people that at the time was considered least distinguished. The Spaniard lineage of its inhabitants safeguarded the colony’s desire of any separation from the “Mother Country,” since Puerto Ricans were Spaniards and loyal citizens of the Spanish Crown. This policy was so successfully implemented that Puerto
Rico was the last Spanish Colony in the Americas. With the contagious separation and independence movements in the Americas, most of the loyal citizens of the Spanish Crown living on those colonies, were forced to leave their home land and emigrated to; Spain, Cuba, or Puerto Rico. This caused an increment in the immigration pattern which kept overwhelming the numbers of the local independence faction in Puerto Rico, and in many ways suppressing such movement.

San Juan Historical Zone represents not only the strong Spanish heritage of Puerto Rico, but also represents the visible and physical value that Spain felt for San Juan and its citizens. It’s also a mute witness of the long and bloody battles of many European powers, trying to gain possession of the Island and their inhabitants. This created a sense of high value and pride among their inhabitants which for more than 400 years witnessed many failed conquest attempts that the “Mother Country” courageously defended and protected. When tourist saw a wall in San Juan, they probably thought about the past Spanish dominion of the Island. When a native saw the same wall, memories of the Spanish roots and the Mother Country’s high value to the Island and its citizens came through. Even today, some scholars argue that is in this same high value vision of Puerto Rico that kept the United States Congress promotion of statehood for the Island. The fact that Puerto Rico was conquered and invaded by the United States in 1898 could be sending Puerto Ricans an unconscious message about their history. Is Puerto Rico a highly valuable treasure that everybody wants to gain possession of?

Conclusions

The cultural history of Puerto Rico is written on the landscapes and architecture of the Island’s Commonwealth. It is natural for people to associate their cultural heritage and identity with monuments of past eras. History also tells that societies evolve and change. Attitudes, perceptions, politics, and symbolisms associated with those same monuments change according to the pace of time. Today’s Puerto Rican society perception of cultural heritage, and their iconographical symbols associated with it, develops through the span of time. Culture is complex and ever changing. The matter of the fact is that Old San Juan is not a static symbol that represents a past era. Old San Juan is a living city that adapts to the changes of time. Dennis J. Gayle and Jonathan N. Goodrich noted on their book, *Tourism Marketing and Management in the Caribbean*. 
Much emphasis is placed on the sites and monuments dimension of culture. This is, in a way, inevitable. It is, after all, the easy route out. Felix Vazquez of Puerto Rico reminded us that Old San Juan, as we have named the historical zone of our city, is not just the remnant of the Spanish Colonial era with its architecture, fortification and monuments. It is a living museum. People live there. Merchants trade and work there. Businessmen and bankers hold court there, and governmental affairs are conducted there among and within the centuries’ old buildings and walls. (Gayle and Goodrich 1993, 144)

Old San Juan is more than a museum. The iconic symbolism of the beloved city is of what it represents; the ever adapting capabilities of their citizens to face the changes of time without loosing their core cultural heritage, identity and uniqueness. Old San Juan not only witnessed a change of flags, but the evolution of the Puerto Rican society in a postcolonial era that is still unresolved. The future is ahead, and whatever the outcome of the referendum that seeks a more close relationship with the US, Old San Juan will stand to remind its people of where they come from and where are they heading now.

References


