

OLD SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, US:

**A CASE STUDY OF HERITAGE TOURISM AS A MECHANISM TO PROMOTE HISTORIC
PRESERVATION & ECONOMICAL DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Heritage tourism became a successful strategy to promote The USA Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as a unique tropical destination in the Caribbean. Driven by the desire to capitalize in the heritage tourism market, both private and public sectors joined efforts to initiate the restoration of the 16th century district of Old San Juan. This effort, in return, launched the island as an international tropical tourist destination with a unique historic character among the Caribbean Islands. Further capital investment was set to promote the development of the infrastructure required to support tourism. As a direct result of this capital investment, the development of the San Juan-Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport allowed San Juan to become the transit hub of the Caribbean Region. The Hub designation guarantees San Juan a constant flow of travelers. The seaport of San Juan also took on an active role in this tourism campaign when it was declared the busiest and most important homeport of cruise-line ships in the world. The Island also gained international repute through its unique tropical flora and fauna, developing an industry ahead of its time – eco-tourism. The incorporation of the tropical rain forest of El Yunque under the U.S. National Park Service as Puerto Rico Caribbean National Tropical Rain Forest (the only one under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service), was internationally acclaimed by the scientific community as an important step in the conservation of the World Wide Biosphere Program. Nonetheless, the development of the tourism industry has greatly influenced the economy and infrastructure of the Greater San Juan Metropolitan Area.

This paper will examine the influence and impact of the flourishing tourism industry on the urban fabric of the city through the review of literature, data and case study methodology. Specifically, this research article will look at the role of heritage tourism as a mechanism to promote historical preservation and economical development; the effects of the 'historical urban fabric' of the city on the 'modern and contemporaneous' renewing program of the city, the relationship of preserving and restoring its city's fabric with the tourism industry, and the vision for San Juan in the next century.

INTRODUCTION

The city of San Juan, the capital of the United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, shares with most of the large metropolis of the United States a never-ending pattern of expansion, suburbanization, and commercialism:

“Straight off the red-eye, driving out of San Juan on a hazy Wednesday morning, the only question on our bleary minds is whether this part of Puerto Rico looks like Southern California, or whether Southern California looks like this part of Puerto Rico” (Tisdale, Karbo: 47-59).

San Juan presents the same pattern of urban development seen throughout the continental US. This pattern is distinctively recognized by an intrinsic network of freeways and highways, connecting suburbs, industrial zones, financial districts, and commercial zones. Nevertheless, the history of San Juan has a distinctive signature in its development.

The greater San Juan Metro area, among all the state capitals, is the oldest European settlement within the Continental US and its territories. Founded in 1509 by the Spaniard Don Juan Ponce de Leon, it was the second European settlement in the Americas and the first port of any vessel crossing the Atlantic. Its valuable geographical 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 construction of fortresses and walls. These attacks were driven by the desire of many European countries to gain possession of the Island from Spain. For 400 years (1493 – 1898) the Island was a Spanish colony, until the United States invaded during the Hispano-American War of 1898. During the next hundred years until today, the city underwent a dramatic transformation of urban expansion and growth.

Under the American Flag, the 20th century Puerto Rican Society witnessed and experienced a dramatic economical transformation. This transformation not only aided the Island to match the living standards of the US Mainland residents, but also encouraged exponentially the diversification of its economy. Tourism was one of the many new industries that came as a result of the stratification of the Island’s economical model. While many of the tourism marketing strategies of the neighbouring Caribbean Islands concentrated their efforts on promoting their unique tropical climate characteristics, the Puerto Rican Tourism Company took a different approach. What makes the Island of Puerto Rico stand out from the other tropical Caribbean tourist destinations? The answer to that question was marketing heritage tourism, which became a successful strategy to promote Puerto Rico as a unique tropical destination in the Caribbean.

Driven by the desire to capitalize on the heritage tourism market, both private and public sectors joined efforts to initiate the restoration of the historic 16th century district of Old San Juan. This effort, in return, launched the Island as an international tropical tourist destination with a unique historic character among the Caribbean Islands.

MODERN SAN JUAN

The municipality of San Juan consists of the districts of Old San Juan, Santurce, Condado, Hato Rey, Rio Piedras, Pueblo Viejo, and Puerto Nuevo. These districts can be described as the historic city core, the suburb, the tourist-hotel strip, the financial centre (Downtown), university centre, industrial zone, and the new seaport respectively. These seven sectors together have a million inhabitants, but including the fact that the greater metropolitan area is composed of six adjoining *Municipios* (the equivalent of counties) including San Juan, Carolina, Trujillo Alto, Guaynabo, Cataño and Bayamon, the total number is expected to be over two million inhabitants by the year 2010. This high concentration of people, the largest in the Caribbean basin, is driven by the stable business and industrial economy of this urban centre. Part of the success of the economy is due to the infrastructure built within the zones.

Modern social theorists concluded that time equals money, a definition which has incredible repercussions in the way that we perceive and design urban space (Harvey, 1995). Today's metropolis is designed around the concept of money production, at the expense of its inhabitants. The faster the goods are produced and delivered, the faster the profits are collected. This capitalist concept has created in the urban fabric a network of communication devices to facilitate the transportation of goods from their places of production to the markets of consumption. Harvey predicted that time would become the tool to measure production. The capacity of the urban fabric to accelerate the surplus production becomes the focal point. New highways and freeways were built in San Juan to safeguard the local industries' ability to transport their goods on time. These devices have not only changed the urban pattern of the city, but sometimes erase it, to the extent that it has created a new form disassociated from the original. The city of San Juan is not an exception to the way that urban spaces have been built to promote and accelerate the production of money. Harvey's social theories also indicated that the style of urban life reflects the social changes created by money. This concept literally translates in the way that the modern infrastructure of San Juan has been built to accommodate those changes. These changes can be recognized in the development of new modern transportation facilities in San Juan during the late 1940 early 1950.

San Juan has the largest international airport in the region. The Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport has become the transit hub of the entire Caribbean basin. The port of San Juan is not only the largest in the region but also the busiest cruise ship port of call in the World!

"We are counting with 23 cruise ships based in San Juan, which gave us the title of the World Capital of Cruise Ships" (Ortego-Borges, 1996: 16).



FIG. 1. CRUISE SHIP PIER, SAN JUAN.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR, AUGUST 2000

Accessible transportation, in addition to the intrinsic pattern of freeways and highways across the city and the entire Island, make it an attraction to investors. This, along with the flourishing tourist industry has turned San Juan into both a travel and business destination in the Caribbean, which has considerably helped the local economy.

THE IMPACT OF THE TOURIST INDUSTRY IN SAN JUAN

The pre-colonial economic model of Puerto Rico before the American Invasion was based on a mono-cultivar-agrarian society, in which sugar and coffee were the major exports. When Spain ceded the Island to the United States in the Treaty of Paris in 1898, a major transformation occurred. Under the American Flag and citizenship, the Island underwent a series of changes to promote an industrial society. Investors were attracted through tax exemptions, skillful and cheap labour, easy access to the mainland (U.S.A.), and a bursting infrastructure to support the new economical model. The new prosperity of the Island changed it from an agrarian society to a highly self-efficient industrial economy. Sugar cane fields were no longer attractive to investors, unless they could be considered as potential sites for developers building new housing projects or industrial buildings. While the industrial sector grew, agriculture declined. This shifting of economy at the expense of the agricultural sector, made possible the expansion and growth of the city of San Juan. New industries were created to compensate for the losses of agriculture, and the tourist sector was one of them.

Tourism is a form of consumption. It is an industry developed around the concept of entertainment, relaxation and joy (the product) in exchange of money (the profit). This industry requires different infrastructures to satisfy its needs:

“The tourism industry, broadly defined as including passenger transport, visitor accommodation, and restaurants, recreational and cultural components, constituted the world’s leading industry in terms of total sales by” (Gayle, Goodrich, 1987: xxi).



FIG. 2. VIEW OF CONDADO, SAN JUAN. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR. AUGUST 2000.

A direct result of the tourist industry in San Juan was the development of the hotel and casino strip in the 1950s known as El Condado and its extension towards Isla Verde, in the county of Carolina.

This strip faces the Atlantic shoreline at the north, separated from the suburbs of Santurce along the south side by a four-lane expressway that leads to the airport. The hotel and casino strip literally stretch from the airport to the perimeters of Old San Juan, forming a continuous linear skyline along the Atlantic shore. Its prestigious location makes it one of the most valuable hotel zones in the Caribbean basin since it offers easy accessibility to all the best entertainment activities, ranging from the white sandy beaches, historic district, casinos, dance club, art galleries, shopping, and restaurants. World-wide hotel chains such as the Hilton, Hyatt, Sands, Radisson, Marriott, Wyndham, Westin, Ritz-Carlton, Holiday Inn, Best Western, Travelodge, and Days Inn among others were attracted to and became established in the Condado-Isla Verde strip.

These hotel enterprises contributed to the development and growth of the economy of the city. The taxable money generated from the Casino was a direct contribution yielded from this industry. The taxable yields went to the educational fund for the public education system that included the University of Puerto Rico. This contribution to the development of a better educational system promoted a highly professional working labor force. As a result, new industries were created by a diverse working class – pharmaceuticals, high-technological equipment, engineering, computers, education, chemicals, petrochemicals, manufactured goods, services, beaux arts, entertainment, architecture, and banking, among others, substituted the

historical agrarian working class. These new industries required a different infrastructure to accommodate their growth and expansion; such is the case for the banking industry.

The Financial District of Hato Rey is known as La Milla de Oro (The Golden Mile), and is located at the south of the suburb of Santurce. It started in the late 1950s with the movement of the local banking headquarters from Old San Juan to the new modern high-rise towers built in the area.



FIG. 3. VIEW OF HATO REY, SAN JUAN.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR. AUGUST 2000.

Along and between the Ponce de Leon and Luis Muñoz Marín Avenues, La Milla de Oro stretched from the perimeter of Santurce inland for a mile and is still growing. Banking offices such as Chase Manhattan, Banco Bisboa Bizcaya, Santander, Bank of Boston, Citibank, First Federal Saving Bank, Banco Popular, Banco Gubernamental de Fomento, Oriental Bank & Trust, BanPonce, First Bank, Ponce Bank, and Western Bank, among others, were established on Hato Rey.

The banking industry helped to finance not only the tourist industry but also new local and international enterprises:

“The tourism industry is the private sector of the economy that received the most incentives from the Banco Gubernamental de Fomento as part of the bank’s mission to promote the economy of the country” (Rodríguez, 1996: 5).

The banking industry has supported other enterprises related to the tourism industry. The San Juan International Airport for the last 25 years underwent a dramatic transformation that has contributed to expanded services and flight capacity. This expansion helped it to become the transit hub of the Caribbean, facilitating the air access of the city from any cardinal point in the hemisphere. In this way, the continuous access of tourists to the area is preserved, also providing a modern transportation facility required in industrial societies. The airport is easily accessible since it is connected with a network of freeways, highways, and expressways that connect to the principal sectors of the capital and the rest of the Island. This modern infrastructure helps to stabilize an economy that depends on the facility of the local industries to deliver their products to the market of consumption.

The two distinctive zones of San Juan, the financial district of Hato Rey and the hotel strip of El Condado, seem to be living on two different clocks. Hato Rey accelerates the rhythm of production, based on Harvey's concept of time equals money, and seems to be in total contradiction with El Condado's leisure-and-pause rhythm. These two districts are connected by freeways and highways located in proximity to the Airport. This proximity has created the potential interaction of city dwellers and tourist. This has also increased the chances of conflict between two zones working at different speeds. The foremost image of a tourist arriving in a tropical paradise is spending two hours in a taxi due to a downtown rush-hour traffic jam on his way to his hotel. The solution to this conflict was the creation of a bridge that crosses the San Jose lagoon, connecting Hato Rey directly to the airport. This avoids the necessity of crossing through Santurce-Condado in order to access Hato Rey. This transportation device has been implemented to improve the Condado hotel strip and Hato Rey access to the airport which has decreased the time-access conflict between the tourist zone and the financial district.

HERITAGE TOURISM

One of the principal products that the city of San Juan is aggressively marketing is its cultural heritage. The inclusion of Old San Juan, the second European settlement in the Americas, as a United Nations World Heritage Site secured its promotion and facilitated marketing. Who can remember the TV Show called *The Love Boat*, with the view of the *Sun Princess* cruise ship crossing in front of one of the sentry boxes of the walls of Old San Juan?



FIG. 4. EL MORRO FORTRESS SENTRY BOX.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.. AUGUST 2000.

The iconography of the colonial architecture of Old San Juan has been so extensively used that we can literally open any travel magazine and a promotional ad featuring a sentry box might easily be found. Heritage tourism has proven to be a useful tool to attract investors to the city as the following quote shows:

"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: xi).

The impact of the heritage tourism in Old San Juan can be seen in its master plan for restoration and conservation of the national monuments such as the Fortress of El Morro, the city walls, and the colonial houses. This plan, implemented 25 years ago, was successfully completed before the 500 year celebration of the discovery of America and Puerto Rico by Christopher Columbus in 1492.

The new development plans for the old district calls for the improvement of the infrastructure to accommodate the modern needs of the metropolis without scarifying the historical character of the city:

“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, fortifications 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, Goodrich, 1993: 144).



**FIG. 5. EL CONVENTO HOTEL,
SAN JUAN.**
PHOTO BY AUTHOR. AUGUST

New redevelopment plans call for the recognition and preservation of the heritage architecture of the old core of the city. The new waterfront project along the cruise ships piers and dock call for the recycling of abandoned storage buildings. Many of them have found utilitarian purposes such as new office spaces, shopping centers, apartment complexes, hotels, and light industry. One of the best examples of the redevelopment of abandoned buildings is the Carmelita's Nuns Convent; now turned into a luxurious hotel.

This plan calls for the creation of lively spaces along with the visual improvement of the waterfront. This would preserve the existing urban fabric while providing needed facilities in the historic core.

The repercussions of the tourism industry in the infrastructure of the city can be summarized as key elements to the rescue of Old San Juan. This district was literally abandoned during the 1920 suburban boom of Santurce, Condado and Hato Rey:

“With the beginning of the construction of new and modern ways of transportation and the introduction of the car that facilitated the development of Puerta de Tierra, Miramar, el Condado and the rest of Santurce, many families and important commercial firms started the exodus from the old city core. That was the beginning of the decay process of the Old San Juan district.” (Mendez-Guerrero, 1989: 22).



FIG. 6. VIEW OF OLD SAN JUAN, SAN JUAN.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR. AUGUST 2000.

Any attempt for a restoration plan for the old city core was at the time impossible, since the banking industry rejected any loans designated for such purposes.

The bankers literally felt that it was a waste of time and money to invest in the restoration of an old brick structure with no modern utilitarian purpose. It was the recognition of the old district as a tourist attraction that would promote investors to pursue the banking industry to grant loans for restoration:

“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 government of our country 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 were 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).



FIG. 7. VIEW OF OLD SAN JUAN'S WALL, SAN JUAN.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR. AUGUST 2000.

Time proved that the restoration program was an asset in the promotion and marketing of cultural tourism. At the same time a monument for the preservation of the Puerto Rican culture was protected, promoting the rescue of the old city core, and turning it into one of the most successful pieces of real estate on the Island

THE SUBURBANIZATION AND METROPOLISATION OF SAN JUAN

The transformation of the pre-colonial agrarian society of Puerto Rico into the post-industrial conditions of the greater San Juan metropolitan area leads to a series of patterns of expansion and growth. The establishment of the industrial economy helped by the investment in tourism produced a pattern of migration from the rural zones of the Island towards the urban center. This exodus of people was created by the decline of the agricultural industry which forced the residents of those areas to find a new way of living. This created a shortage of housing and jobs in the metropolitan areas. Planning agencies and developers were assigned the task of providing affordable housing for the continuous demand created by a migration pattern that persists today:

“Several forces were responsible for the exodus from the countryside. Certainly the burgeoning of urban factory and construction jobs was primary, but the possibility of government and professional employment also provided a long-standing attraction (Boswell, 1978). The expanding urban markets for services also created the opportunity for many migrant women to become secondary family-income earners (Safa, 1974). Sharp wage differentials of over 2:1 produced a strong pull. Urban access to higher-quality secondary education, universities, and more specialized medical facilities proved an additional motivation (Wells, 1969: 177-8; Carnoy, 1970). Perhaps, however, the most fundamental source of in-migration to urban areas was the impoverishment of the rural periphery.” (Potter, 1989: 290).

The demand for housing led to the construction of large housing projects called urbanizaciones and also high-rise condominiums.



FIG. 8. ISLA VERDE RESIDENTIAL & HOTEL STRIP, CAROLINA.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR. MAY 2000

The “urbanizaciones” were arranged in the traditional cul-de-sac or grid pattern, and they were mainly composed of single-family units. The construction material preferred was concrete, since the potential of the Island to be struck by seasonal hurricanes is extremely high. The potential of a massive earthquake every 75 years is also another reason for the preference of concrete as the primary construction material.

These two regulations created a distinctive signature on the architecture of the city. Instead of glassy high-rise structures, reinforced concrete was promoted.

The high demand for housing in the metropolitan area resulted in the urbanisation boom of the 1960s. This urbanisation pattern was encouraged by the demand and the social status created by the acquisition of such housing units. Puerto Rican Spanish heritage seeks individual dignity and respect among its community. This is resolved by acquiring higher social status through a better socio-economical status. The socio-economical status is demonstrated by the acquisition of a house. This cultural attitude can be traced to the colonial era in which royalty showed its social status by embellishing properties such as mansions and fortresses. This is the origin of the folklore attitude that said a man is a king in his house:

“Vernacular “Urbanizacion” houses also signify modernity. But dignity and the respectability acquired through ownership are more fundamental meanings. Thus such houses are ostentatiously distinguished from each other with diverse exterior embellishment. Vernacular Urbanizacion houses’ message of status and identity are directed to the local neighborhood. The degree of investment reveals them to be prime conveyors of status messages” (Jopling, 1998: 258).

The affordability of these housing projects to the middle working class encourages the actual pattern of sub-urban explosion in the greater metropolitan area. This along with the cultural attitude of housing as a tool to acquire dignity and respect among its community proved to be a successful element to sell and justify the construction of more Urbanizaciones.

The pattern of urbanization in San Juan can be easily comprehended through the eyes of social theorists such as M. Weber. The demand for housing in the area was not only created by the inland migration from the rural areas toward the metropolis, but an inner desire of people to look for better social status. The cultural attitude towards the social status acquired through housing ownership in the Puerto Rican culture summarises Weber's ideas of class position in a structural society. This is the case of the middle class in the Puerto Rican society, whose demands for better housing and social status (position) encouraged the urbanisation boom in the late 1950s.

The pattern of urbanization spread out through the entire city limits towards the surrounding counties. These new communities are connected through a network of highways and freeways. Cars became the principal medium of transportation for every household, which created a chaotic density of vehicles running on the roads at rush hour. The current solution of expanding the lanes of the roads is not solving the traffic jams at rush hour. Current investments in massive transportation are yet to be implemented. The Aqua-Espreso (water expressway) made use of the existing channels that interconnect the lagoons, marinas, rivers and the bay of San Juan to run shuttle boats from the suburbs to the financial district. This has partially alleviated road conditions, but not the problem.



FIG. 9. HATO REY. PHOTO BY AUTHOR. JANUARY 2006.

The continuous growth of Hato Rey is exponentially increasing the car density on the main routes to downtown every morning and evening. A current master plan to build a light train or subway system is in the first phase of construction. Historically, San Juan and the rest of the island used to be connected with a network of train routes. This network was substituted by the present highway and freeway system. Today, planners are considering potential connections of the proposed subway

with the most critical areas – the airport, financial district (Hato Rey), and Santurce. Later, the plan is to extend the train to the cities of Ponce and Caguas, the second and third largest metropolitan urban areas on the Island. This would alleviate the current chaotic driving conditions at rush hour created by the extensive sub-urbanisation of the metropolitan area.



FIG. 10. TREN URBANO (SUBWAY), SAN JUAN.
PHOTO BY AUTHOR. JANUARY 2006.

Trends indicate that the existing pattern of in-land migration towards large urban centers will prevail until the next century. This would increase the need for affordable housing and better mass-transportation systems. The subway system currently under construction seems to be an imperative solution to accommodate the exponentially increasing demand for transportation for both residents and tourist alike.

The current single-family housing trend will not be affordable. The increase of land value due to demand could promote high-density housing projects such as apartment buildings, high-rise condominiums and townhouses. New job markets would be needed to attend to the demands of population growth. The ability of the tourism industry to attract foreign and mainland (U.S.A.) investors has been noteworthy. The aggressive tourist campaign of the Puerto Rican Tourist Company seems to be attracting more capital and investment in the market. New industries and the redevelopment of the agricultural sector are recommended to decrease the migration towards urban centers by providing job alternatives inside the Island. The Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport designation as the transit hub of the Caribbean basin has provoked contradictory opinions regarding the benefits of this expansion to the local tourism industry. One side speculates that tourists arrive at the airport only to be connected with another flight with a final destination other than San Juan. This means they don't stop to do 'business on the Island' and the only beneficiary is the airline. The other side argues that the hub designation will promote better flight schedules, increase daily flights and connections to the Island, and nevertheless lower flight rates that in the end will benefit local tourism. This would increase the international exposure of the Puerto Rican tourism industry since, if even the passenger arrives in San Juan only to be connected to another destination, the take off view of the Old San Juan district is breathless.



FIG. 11. VIEW OF EL MORRO FORTRESS, SAN JUAN.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR. MAY 2000.



FIG. 12. VIEW OF FORTALEZA, OLD SAN JUAN.
PHOTO BY AUTHOR. MAY 2000

Nevertheless, the use of heritage tourism as an advertisement tool to attract and increase the volume of tourists to San Juan has proven to be extraordinary. In return, the economical returns from the tourist sector have contributed greatly to the socioeconomic development of San Juan. In return, the preservation and restoration of the Old San Juan Historic District has been economically assured for future generations to come and enjoy.

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