

## Casitas, Healing the Wounds of Displacement

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### Abstract

In our increasingly multi-cultural society many voices are not expressed in the public landscape. The design of public space often reflects a class based system, representing the values of those in power. Often these places ignore the psychological, spiritual or therapeutic needs of the users (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989,1995). This is magnified for recent immigrants who may be undergoing a sense of loss and displacement, alienation from the culture around them and loss of empowerment and self esteem. With the increase of moving populations at a global scale, this is an issue common to many cities around the world. In New York City, a unique form of park spaces have been created on reclaimed neglected urban land which meet many of the community needs, social, spiritual, cultural and ecological. In these gardens, activities range from passive meditation to active children's play areas. The raising of food and medicinal crops engage the users and offer a sense of belonging to those who may feel disconnected and lonely. As green oases in typically chaotic environments these gardens are valued by the users for their restorative benefits including stress reduction, ability to regain focus, a calming engagement with nature and increased sense of well being. Created by Puerto Rican immigrants, these lush oases, re-creations of their indigenous landscapes, provide respite from the surrounding streets in a familiar "home" setting. *Casitas* constitute a unique blend of landscape, vernacular architecture and art. This paper will present how these spaces are used as restorative refuges and as places to express and affirm traditional cultural values, how they offer a meaningful alternative to traditional western gardens and public parks for local communities, and ease the process of displacement, alienation and adaptation in a new environment. These gardens foster and reinforce identity, self efficacy, self esteem and place congruent continuity (Winterbottom 1999). The community garden should be a place not only of great plant diversity, but offers a wide range of uses and meanings. In this iteration of community gardens the building of and attraction to the casita represents both a connection to and a celebration of traditional Puerto Rican culture and a reclamation and adaptation of the environment by the Puerto Rican community.

### Introduction

The migration of people and the consequential severing of familiar connections to home and place are increasingly prevalent as populations are displaced in many parts of the world. The relocation of large groups

of people due to natural calamities, ethnic cleansing, armed conflicts, incarceration and extreme poverty usually results in a loss of self - identity, esteem, efficacy and continuity, leading to depression, loneliness and apathy. There is increasing evidence that gardens are intentionally being used to recreate familiar environ-

ments, to soften the harsh environs of refugee camps and unfamiliar surroundings and to reconnect to the natural world. The therapeutic qualities of these gardens and their value in alleviating stresses caused by the resettlement process may seem obvious yet is rarely studied or documented.



Figure 1 Vietnamese Gardener in Holly Park



Figure 2 Garden in Refugee Camp, Bosnia Housing Project, Seattle WA

This paper will focus on the therapeutic benefits of gardens created by Puerto Rican immigrants to the United States. These gardens represent one unique expression of immigrant gardens and it should be noted that there are many examples to investigate. Remnants of gardens created by Italian immigrants at the turn of

the century can still be found in many American cities. Gardens created by Indian and Pakistani and African immigrants are common in London, and gardens created by Vietnamese, Korean African and Hmong refugees and immigrants take on distinct in housing projects and community gardens throughout Seattle, Washington. In Bosnia-Herzegovina a series of community gardens were created for the victims of ethnic cleansing. In this unique program, refugees relocated far from their traditional communities have been able to achieve a semblance of stability through their engagement with the gardens. The act of gardening is a momentary escape from the daily memories of the war. In part because of the shared gardening experience many have been able to reformulate a social network, often in partnership with those from the opposite ethnic group. Improved health has been credited to improved nutrition supported by direct access to fresh produce.

During the Second World War large numbers of Japanese-Americans were relocated to detention camps. Elaborate gardens were created and maintained in many of the camps as reminders of home and as retreats from their hostile surroundings. For many the activity of gardening offered a distraction from long periods of boredom and uncertainty.

Gardening programs in prisons and correctional facilities have been shown to decrease the stresses of prison life, reduce infractions among participants and help inmates improve their functioning while incarcerated. The work of Katherine Snead in California and the vocational program at Rikers Island in New York City are two well known examples.

### Brief History

In the 1980's, residents in the Puerto Rican barrios of New York City reclaimed and planted vacant lots, deepening the connections to their cultural and natural worlds, and bringing order and a wholeness to the deteriorating quality of life. The sites, commonly referred to as *Casitas*, are a distinct combination of vernacular architecture, landscape and art. The spaces are composed of garden plots, open areas, and pathways surrounding a *casita de madera* or little wooden house. The structure serves as a clubhouse, and the garden provides space for ornamental and crop production and for socializing. These spaces, created by members of the surrounding Puerto Rican communities serve a variety of cultural, social and political uses. As folklorist Joseph Sciorra points out "Planting a garden and erecting a wooden structure are often strategic attempts to force out car thieves and drug dealers who use abandoned lots for illegal activities. Enclosed by a 20-foot chain link fence, the casita is a haven from the harsh inner-city life, an oasis where temporary repose is possible" *Sciorra, 1996*.





Figure 3 Casita Rojo, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street New York City. Casita madera is in the background with the garden plots in the foreground

As evolving cultural prototypes, these gardens offer an alternative to traditional western gardens, patterned after European gardens of the upper class. These gardens are not simply recreations of vernacular Caribbean gardens but are derivations and adaptations of the traditional forms. As Sciorra, states “the *casita* is not merely a nostalgic lament for an idealized past but a form of community organization whereby control of one’s immediate environment is achieved through the use of traditional expressive culture” *ibid*. The *casitas* create a social focus, fostering memories and building meaningful connections for a displaced community. The gardens provide a safe and nurturing environment, where the participants can regain a sense of control, reestablish a familiar place and define their environs through planting and cultivation. They thrive with a unique blend of collective and individual expressions. It is this personal quality, woven into traditional typologies that make these gardens so extraordinary.



Figure 4 Community gathering in El Barrio, New York City

The methodology used in this study includes historical research, in depth surveys conducted with the principle organizers of the *casitas*, informal interviews and bi-lingual questionnaires completed by the users. A short section profiles the users and a longer section

focuses on how and why the space is used and valued, field observation, site surveys and photographic documentation.

### Connections to the Land

Much of Puerto Rican culture retains its connection to nature, to an engagement with the land and specifically to the rural landscape. This connection can be traced to the religious and agricultural life of traditional rural communities that are disappearing on the island. Catholicism prevails among Puerto Ricans, but not all Puerto Ricans practice worship formally. The relationship to the church in Puerto Rico is based on individual revelation through reading of the scriptures rather than dependence upon traditional figures of church authority. This was most pronounced in the “Jibaros”, a Puerto Rican folk term for the rural mountain people of mixed Indian, black and Spanish ancestry who developed their own response to Spanish institutions. By the 1800’s, the Jibaro represented a significant proportion of the island population practicing subsistence farming. As Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens describes, this variation of Catholicism drawn from Jibaros religious beliefs centered on “the cycle of nature and committed to an



Figure 5 Placing an offering in the casita garden, Bronx, New York



often difficult struggle for subsistence. The people of the rural areas fashioned a religious expression around two things, without which their existence would not be possible-land and family. Thus religious practices and nature's cycles were very closely tied together. The planting and pasturage season, for example, usually began in early February and was initiated by the feasts of the Purification of Mary and of St. Blaise" *Diaz-Steves, 1996*. This relationship of religion to the land can be seen in both the Santos found in many of the gardens and in the religious fiestas held in the casitas. Concurrently, Afro-Caribbean beliefs called Santeria and Spiritualism featuring the use of herbs is frequently practiced in the casitas.

For many of the Puerto Rican immigrants who came to New York City in the 1950's and 60's and eventually built the gardens, the casita was an expression of the mythic Jibaro jungle dwelling and a reconnection to childhood memories of summer houses located in the rural parts of the island.

### A Theoretical Foundation

An understanding of four concepts in environmental psychology, derived from the work of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) may help to explain how the casitas function as therapeutic landscapes that mend the social fabric.

Self-identity enables an individual or group to maintain personal or collective distinctiveness or uniqueness. Often this is connected to a supporting environment that keeps the sense of self intact. Self-esteem is the positive evaluation of oneself or of the group one identifies with. Korpela, has shown how favorite environments can support self-esteem, an enabling of pride through association. The third concept, self-efficacy, is an individual's belief in their capabilities to meet situational demands and carry out chosen activities in a manageable environment.

The concept of place-congruent continuity, the fourth concept is based on the continuity of specific places that hold emotional significance for people. A sense of continuity is maintained using characteristics of places that are generic and transferable from one place to the other, as the casita is for the Puerto Rican immigrants. Thus a person or group may make, seek or recreate a place felt to be congruent with his/her settlement identification.

### Gardens of Refuge, Nurturing self – esteem, efficacy and identity

As a refuge the casita represents something of a cross between oasis and fort. The oasis as "a fertile or green

area in an arid region" or "something providing relief from boring or dreary routine" embodies the creation of a lush verdant space, signifies hope and provides therapeutic environment.

The fort "a strong or fortified space" signifies a reclaiming of and control over a space amidst a chaotic and threatening environment that reduces stress. The spaces, most the size of one or two tenement buildings and surrounded by older 19<sup>th</sup> century row housing or apartment buildings are fenced where they abut the street.



Figure 6 A moment of contemplation inside El Bohio Brooklyn, New York



Figure 7 The fence defines the fort at Casita Rojo, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street New York City





Figure 8 Inside the verdant gardens of Los Compadres, Bronx, New York

As an oasis the casita is an aesthetic, social and spiritual retreat. The garden consists of edible, ornamental and medicinal plantings mixed with opportunistic species, presenting a contrast of wild and cultivated, with the boundary between the two often blurred and the whole offering a natural counterpoint to the hardness of the surrounding environment. Many users reflected that the casita provided a place to go to and relax, to forget about their problems, or as one woman responded "It has changed me in such a way that when I feel nervous I would go to the garden and forget everything. I go back home a new person", or as another stated "Our mother is sick and we all have a lot of problems. The plants signify something for us; nature helps release stress." Both being within the garden and the act of cultivating it were regarded as effective for reducing anxiety. The many elderly gravitated toward the shade trees. Many of the middle aged women would spend time in the vegetable and ornamental gardens, while others would sit in the shade of the porches and talk. Many scholars have documented a connection between the landscape and human physical and physiological health. Roger Ulrick's classic work and the Kaplan's current work on the stress reductive properties of the landscape are

examples *Ulrick, 1977, Kaplan and Kaplan, 1978*. The importance of stress relieving properties and renewal was repeatedly affirmed by users who described the casita as a "Calming, peaceful, place I can retreat to."



Figure 9 Cultivation in casita Humaco, El Barrio, New York City

In this case the source of the anxiety is a *milieu* of poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, drug trafficking, gang and other criminal activity. While an oasis, the casita is also fort. Most of the users reiterated their feelings that the "streets" were dangerous and drug dealing was rampant. The street was often referred to as an entity, such as "out on the street things are bad, a lot of fighting and things." The issue of safety was mentioned more by men than by women although most women referred not to their own safety, but that of their children's. Within the casita limits on activity and behavior are upheld and enforced. Drugs, fighting, swearing and other behaviors considered disrespectful are not tolerated. For many mothers, the casita is a place where their children can safely play under other adult's supervision, leaving the mother's time to socialize and recreate. Both men and women mentioned that the current site had previously been taken over by drug dealers or users. They were scared for their children's safety and worried about the effects of visually witnessing drug use and the increased crime associated with it. For many the motivation had been to reclaim the space pushing out the crime, drugs, and trash dumping.

For many of the male users the primary safety issue was the avoidance of confrontation. One source for this can be found in the traditional social mores and values of Puerto Rico, specifically the concepts of "respecto" and "dignidad". As defined by social scientist, Anthony Lauria, respecto "signifies proper attention to the requisites of the ceremonial order of behavior, and to the moral aspects of human activity. The verb form, repeater, indicates that in any encounter, one expresses deference to the person whom he confronts" *Anthony Lauria, 1964*. In a study by the Puerto Rican Forum, "dignidad" "is sometimes explained as the display of a decent regard for the individual regardless of his social position." While one may be poor in Puerto Rico, the

association of wealth to respect is less pervasive on the island. For many of the users the transition between cultures is demoralizing and humiliating. The Casita provides a cultural enclave, a structured environment in which traditional Puerto Rican aspects of socialization and behavior are accepted.



Figure 10 The “home” landscape brings solace to many of the Puerto Rican immigrants Casita Rojo, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street New York City

For a significant number of the users, the garden, and its cultivation is the most valued space within the casita. In answer to the question. When asked “what do you do there?” seventy percent of the users answered that gardening was their primary activity. This was substantiated when fifty percent answered that it was the plants or the garden that they most liked in the casita. When asked if any objects had special meaning eighty percent identified the garden as special, particularly the process of planting and the observation of plant growth. Thirty percent responded that the garden made them less nervous, happier, and was “therapeutic”. Surrounded by a high stress environment and with a lack of accessible natural places, the importance of the garden as a stress reducer appears to be important.

Four kinds of planting were identified. The first, food species, are planted for consumption and represent 50% to 80% of the cultivated areas. The second group, ornamentals, includes perennials and annuals, shrubs, and shade trees. The third group, herbs, is found in all the gardens and is used for cooking and in medicinal beverages or baths. Some are used by practitioners of Spiritism or Santeria for their healing ceremonies. The fourth group is opportunistic plants found at the edges of the sites and a few of these are also used as medicinals.

Most of the species grown are not indigenous to Puerto Rico although a few gardeners acquire seeds from the island. Some, not native to Puerto Rico, visually resemble plants found on the island. As Gernaro Lanausse, of Batey Dona Provi notes, the Russian Olive tree in his garden “looks very similar to one of our bean trees. The candules, it’s the same leaf, same color, same everything. For everybody who passes by

that’s Puerto Rican, they say I know that tree, when is it going to have fruit?”. Thus the aesthetics, despite species differences seems to reconnect users with their cultural landscape.



Figure 11 Father and son El Barrio, New York City

The casita differs significantly from most city public parks in that it provides open space that residents reclaim and control. The opportunity to partake in the natural and agricultural processes reflects much of the Puerto Rican culture and character. Users feel connected to the place both as a park and “as home”. In both the questionnaires and the interviews, responses such as “The Casita reminds me of my island, I feel as if I was in Puerto Rico,” or “Its important for our cultural identity because it represents the way our ancestors and grandparents used to live,” or “Yes, it’s important because we mustn’t forget about our culture and customs” were heard.

Participants indicated repeatedly that their connection to the cycles of planting, cultivating, harvesting and consuming food within the defined space of the garden was very important as a symbol of the Jibaro’s subsistence gardens. There was also great pride expressed among older members that their children share a place and experience that they themselves fondly remember, one that represents an indigenous way of life. For many the casita represents an idealized landscape, one that embodies the history and mythology of the Puerto Rican culture. Robert Reilly, a noted landscape historian points to the relationship between distinctive cultures and distinctive landscapes.

In the casitas, through all seasons, people stroll in and out, play dominoes, eat native dishes and listen to traditional music. In many of these neighborhoods, the sidewalk, streets and parks, once used for play, are today perceived to be too dangerous. In some casitas play elements are built or installed. Los Amigos and The Children’s Garden were created specifically to provide safe, defined spaces for children’s play. These secured play areas relieve some of the mothers of their constant supervision, resulting in increased sociability.





Figure 12 Children use the casita as a playground El Barrio, New York City



Figure 13 Celebrating La Fiesta de la Cruz in Casita Rojo, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street New York City

In early May, the springtime feast of La Fiesta de la Cruz, and in June, the feast of Saint John the Baptist is celebrated in many casitas. The garden is also the center for a ritual of healing by the community for its members, as exemplified in the leaving of prayers for those in trouble, or the raising of funds to pay for a funeral through the sale of produce. The celebration includes various processions, “often with young women assuming important roles, in which a statue of Mary is crowned with flowers or a home altar is erected with a prominent cross amidst flowers and candles,

and before which people from the community come to sing a special rosary called *rosario de cruz*.” At the Casita Rojo, a woman in the neighborhood had made a nine year promise, in this case it was explained she had “fallen into a bad way of life” and had made a vow to change. The procession corresponded with moving the promise from one casita that was to be demolished to Casita Rojo. Once the altar with nine levels, one for each year, had been constructed, each level was adopted by a community member who lit the candles, made prayers and left offerings. The celebration, held in the garden is a spectacle of candlelight and flowers. It illustrates the importance of the garden as the place of celebration and ritual. The casita reconnects the community with traditional practices and serves as a social service network for the greater community or neighborhood, in this case, supporting young women in trouble. Another example is the raising of funds from the members of Casita Rojo to finance the funeral of a young girl who had died of AIDS. Her mother could not afford the burials, and by this shared endeavour the mother was connected to the greater community in a time of need. Ritual and performance play an important role in defining the casita as a living expression of culture, not simply a recreation or facsimile. Seth Low, an environmental physiologist has developed a theory of “symbolic ties that bind” and within this broad categorization explores the role collective experiences play in creating a tie to and belief in the importance of a place particularly in a religious, spiritual or mythical reference. Pilgrimage and celebratory events in a specific location can bind the participants to the place. The use of narration in its aspects of story telling and naming acts to connect cultures to specific places. The religious rituals, plena performances and celebrations of life changes all bind the participants to the Casita as a religious, civic and therapeutic landscape that for many is the ultimate expression of their culture.

The Casitas provide a cultural zone where alternative values are represented and where traditional



Figures 14 Plena performance at Rincon Corillo, Bronx, New York





Figure 15 Community socializing at Los Compadres, Bronx, New York

Puerto Rican aspects of socialization and behavior are accepted. The family unit tends to be extended, close knit and geographically close, so visits and child care among family members and friends is frequent and common. Because of the climate much of the life in Puerto Rico takes place out of doors, in the yards and streets. In addition to the cultural change Puerto Ricans are subjected to greater poverty. One in two lives in poverty, live in denser and older housing, and achieve less schooling. Many came to the US seeking low skill

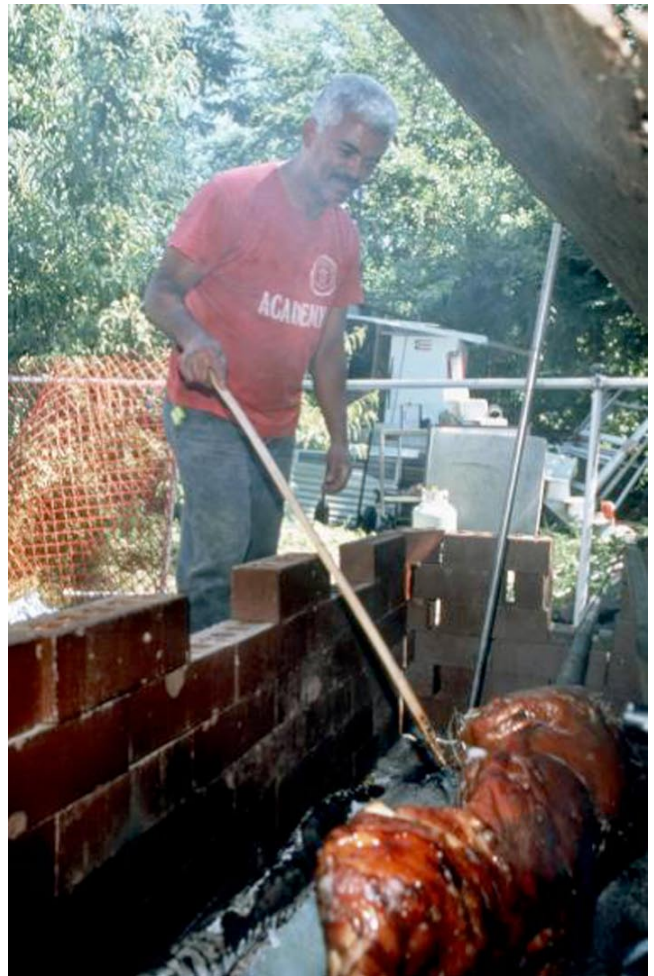


Figure 17 Traditional food preparation, Casita Rojo, 3<sup>rd</sup> Street New York City



Figure 16 The pride of cultivation, Bronx, New York



Figure 18 A mural that portrays El Moro, San Juan Puerto Rico in Harlem, New York City

jobs, however as these opportunities are decreasing, many are unable to keep or find work. Many of the women are finding employment in textiles or service related jobs, becoming the primary earners. This runs counter to the traditional roles in Puerto Rico, causing a breakdown of the family and lowered self esteem among the older males. The casita allows those using it to reassume the roles they had lost, and can regain self esteem through building projects, food preparation, musical performances and storytelling. In the



casita, one is not judged by standards of wealth or job status, but by the beauty and health of the garden, the civic activities one hosts and by genuine expressions of Puerto Rican culture.

### The Casita as Continuity

Fundamentally, the connection for the culture is a connection to nature, to the rural landscape, to an engagement with the land, and when transported into the heart of the dense urban environment it is made all the more powerful in both the contextual contrast and the will to preserve and create these places. As a place, every aspect of the casita, including the architecture, the batey and the garden expresses Puerto Rican culture. Within the casita forms of expression can be found in the visual art, the garden layout, the plant selection, the music, the dance, and the social life, and it is these elements woven together that form the experienced metaphorical sense of place. The indigenous architecture, in its ever evolving manifestations, the gardens, clearly subsistence in form and use, and the animals in pens or running loose are all components of a cultural landscape, a “home”. Clare Cooper Marcus and others have developed the concept of environmental memories which suggests that an adult’s creation of a dwelling or landscape is influenced by childhood emotional environmental experiences. Many of the casita users referenced this concept when they discussed their childhood memories of visiting the summer “casita” back on the island. The gardens are also very evocative to those on the “other side” of the fence. Many, unaware of the Puerto Rican memories are lured to the casitas as places of nature. They emit a strong presence transcending cultural barriers and tapping more universal cultural meanings.

### Conclusion

The building of and the attraction to the casita represent the celebration of traditional Puerto Rican culture as a familiar, nurturing environment that reinforces self and group identity, self – esteem, efficacy and reestablishes continuity between the traditional and the adapted home. The Taino bohio living unit, the Jibaro subsistence farm, and the Arrabal squatter houses are all powerful influences on the forms found in the contemporary casitas. And it is the spirit of the independent Jibaro farmer, now a mythic character in the hearts of many Puerto Ricans, and of the Taino, bound to nature for survival that are important cultural influences and affirmations of identity, that can be seen today in the casitas.



Figure 19 The farm and squatter house, Bronx, New York



Figure 20 The community center, Los Compadres, Bronx, New York

The therapeutic interactions with the lush gardens, and the expression of culture through dance, music and art are all manifestations of the casita as a refuge. The deep connection to nature stems from an indigenous interpretation of Catholicism, Spiritism and Santaria, but the gardens fundamental purpose is also imbued in the need to have nature interactions, interactions that were common on the island, but are now difficult to access. The natural connection to the home landscape offers an environment of familiarity that reduces feelings of alienation, alleviates stresses of poverty and addresses identity confusion brought on by immigration.



The casita as a social refuge also serves as a community center, created and supported by its members, disseminating information to the community. The garden as a place of cultivation serves a very important role in reducing stress and evokes rich cultural memories. The harvesting of fresh vegetables increases the nutritional value of the gardener's diets and the medicinal plants offer an economic and traditional means of addressing minor medical problems. The casita as a place plays an important role as the place of celebration marking major events in the religious and cultural life of the community and its children. The casita is a place reinforcing cultural identity for the "group" is also a place for individual expression. The casita as a cultural oasis provides an "alternative to being American in any narrow, culturally delimited sense. Beyond its place in the pluralist mosaic, Latino culture harbors a deeper challenge to mainstream U.S. society in the form of a different, and potentially divergent, ethos and aesthetic" Flores, 1996. The Puerto Rican and American flags, typically flown in the casita, symbolize the transference, affirmation and celebration of Puerto Rican culture, and its contribution to the diversity and richness of American culture. It is a living culture, not one of legend relegated sadly to a museum, but, as the casita illustrates, a culture able to thrive and grow.



Figure 21 A class in traditional drumming at Los Compares, Bronx, New York



Figure 22 Pride of place, Lower Eastside, New York City

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