(Un) Documented Urban Calligraphy: (In)Visibility in the *Callejón* of the Hispanic Caribbean

CARLOS CAMACHO
Universidad Politécnica de Puerto Rico

> Porosity results not only from the indolence of the Southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved...
>
> – Walter Benjamin, from "Naples" (1924)[1]

In the early to mid 1920's, philosopher Walter Benjamin penned several city portraits of misunderstood or hard to comprehend places like Naples. From his unique vantagepoint, viewing the urban sphere as a labyrinth, as the crystallized memory of spaces, Benjamin attempted a novel kind of history of the city. He focused his observations and analysis on forgotten spaces, abandoned places, and edge conditions, where the spectacle of everyday life is played out. For him, these are the very antithesis of the monumental sites of a city. Benjamin's portraits of Old World cities surprisingly seem to conjure up qualities and conditions that are also found in cities of the New World, and thus, his methodology presents itself as a touchstone for a new kind of historical study of so far, little understood phenomena of the urban context in the Hispanic Caribbean.

My childhood recollections of growing up in San Juan, Puerto Rico call to mind one such phenomenon, which has been virtually ignored by architectural historians: a narrow public passageway or *callejón* in a part of San Juan called Barrio Obrero (literally, "the workers" neighborhood). This passageway separated my grandmotherís house from a store owned by a man we knew as simply "Don Luis." That open-air passagewayóno more than a paved strip of bare concreteóallowed several families to reach their homes inside a dense urban block. Further back is another recollection of a compelling space: the inside of my grandfather's candies truck, with which he made a spare yet pleasant living. As a child, I used to run back and forth, from one end to the other of the truck's narrow cabin, amazed as much at its length as by the tempting sweets that covered the surfaces to either side. Today, these two interconnected recollections have become personal metaphors for the *callejón*, a unique feature of the Caribbean City, an urban typology that is at once highly familiar and yet quite unknown. We might call it a *micro-phenomenon*, one that is latent in collective memory but all the more unfamiliar precisely because of its ubiquity in the urban fabric.

My project for a course entitled Mid Career Research, a junior requirement at The New School of Architecture, at Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, began as a study and typological analysis of the *callejón* in Puerto Rican cities and *barrios*, acknowledging topography and morphology as key influences in the growth and development of Antillean cities. This essentially taxonomical study proved to be the first in the region to focus on so mundane a topic as the *callejones*.[2] Perhaps this is owing to considerable discomfort among architects and historians about the fact that a comprehensive history of the architecture of the Antilles is still lacking, and not much has yet been published about the "monumental" history of architecture in the region, much less the truly minor typologies such as the callejón. This lack has prevented better professional and public understanding of the urban and architectural heritage of the Antilles as one of *shared* as well as *particular* concerns. However, scholars are now making a concerted effort to recuperate the history of those aspects of the Antillean city that have been left out of the "canon"of institutional and official architecture by those who assumed responsibility for preserving the architecture of the past.

Modern historiographic methods advocate studies of the lesser figures and phenomena of everyday life, as for example, Mexico's seminal text, *Pueblo en Vilo* by Luis González y González. In particular, Puerto Rican historian Fernando Picó, in spite of not being a specialist in art or architecture, has signaled, even if indirectly, a methodological path for historians of the Caribbean city. Concerned with understanding the texture of everyday life in the past, Picó writes about characters of lesser relevance than the protagonists of history with a capital "H" – the unacknowledged ones, surely the same sorts of figures Benjamin called the "disinherited." [3] Whether reconstructing the daily lives of policemen, peasants, or priests, Picó provides a framework for research into persons and places that have otherwise gone practically unrecorded.[4] In the same way that Picó pursued a journalists' outlook or a prostitute's milieu instead of a governorís decree or a politicianís decisions, architectural and urban historians of the Hispanic Caribbean must now take a closer look at topics long ignored, rather than at some of our regionís more heroic, more familiar themes, such as fortifications, grid planning in colonial cities, or the reception of modernism in Latin America.

The callejón is a specifically regional phenomenon in search of coherent analysis, since it can no longer be explained away as "tradition," or with reference to "influences," or merely the impact of building codes. In the same way that the experience of everyday life for a baker or shoemaker in the nineteenth century perpetually eludes the historian, the improvised or *ad hoc* urban transformations that resulted in the appearance of *callejones* remain an enigma. Today, the word callejó n is used indiscriminately, since there is little real awareness of the distinguishing characteristics of this subtle and unique urban typology. To some, *callejones* are pared-down paved strips that facilitate access to a group of dwellings; many confuse them with ordinary narrow streets, interior pedestrian connections known as *pasajes*, or open-air steps of some extension, known as *escalinatas*. The uniqueness of the callejón seems to call for a working definition based on spatial and architectural criteria that characterize it as a type of street or public space.

In English translation, the word *passage* rather than *alley* best captures the essence of the term callejón in Spanish. However, even

in Spanish, definitions seem to depend upon individual examples rather than universal traits or features of this particular urban typology. The Latin term *angiportum*, from *angus* (or narrow) and *portus* (or passage), connotes its Old World origins, but admittedly seems as remote from the Caribbean reality as the Italian variant, the *vicolo*. In fact, all three of these are prototypical examples of the typology, and developed successively in Rome and its colonies, the rest of the cities of Italy, and finally, in the colonies of the New World: the *angiportum*, the *vicolo*, and the *callejón* are related *in kind*, if not in time and space.

Architecturally speaking, like the *angiportum* and the *vicolo*, *callejones* are longitudinal pedestrian spaces that typically reach from one street to another and seem to have developed through constant use, from the sketchiest footpath or access way to paved passages, as the most efficient link between one property and another or between properties. They generally lack any kind of roof or covering, and their character is largely determined by the built elements to either side. Like Sebastiano Serlio's perspective drawings of ordinary Italian streets or *vicoli*,[5] the callejón juxtaposes architectural elements in an eclectic urban elevation that prefigures the comic and satiric "sets" that follow in the treatise. This is not the grand, monumental architecture of the tragic "set," but rather the architecture of everyday life, densely fitted together on a small scale.

In the Caribbean urban setting, the *callejón* functions like the hallway of a dwelling, where neighboring facades act as the lateral walls that open not onto rooms, but rather other spaces and lives. In the Caribbean city, one sees everywhere an interpenetration of inside and outside space, street and dwelling, as the ubiquitous *jalousies* blink open and shut, giving pedestrians unexpected glimpses of the most private kind of space. Here again, Benjamin's observations about Naples seem apt for the Caribbean context as well: "Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere.... Similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life.... Just as the living room appears on the street with chairs, heart, and altar, so only much more loudly, the street migrates into the living room.... Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought."[6] As Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott has written, in the Caribbean, "poverty is poetry," "a condition of life as well as imagination."[7]

The intense social cohesion brought about by the prototype might be understood to stem from the very same social compression that triggered it. The essential social and spatial coherence of the *callejó n* reminds us again of Walter Benjamin, in this case his description of an arcade in Paris as "a city, indeed, a world in miniature."[8] The paving stones of the *callejón* are magnetic insofar as they can be considered the main generative feature of the typology. The footsteps of the dweller, the shopkeeper, and the passerby hammer them into being over an extended period of time, and in response, they attract and tie together the most disparate elements in a milieu that suits the Caribbean city. They maintain a specificity through their distinctive names, such as Callejó n Buló n (named after a resident family), Callejón del Gámbaro (of the shrimp), Callejón de la Capilla (of the chapel), Callejón del Tamarindo (of the Tamarind tree), Callejón Pasillo (of the hallway), and so on. The name oftentimes betrays something of the spatial nature of the *callejó n* as well, such as Callejón el Pasadizo (the covered way), Callejón Reguero (the mess), and Callejón Sal-si-Puedes (get out if you can). But *callejones* are likely to have been renamed time and again in response to changes in population or economic base. Interestingly enough, again it is Benjamin who wrote about Naples that "no one orients himself by house numbers,"[9] because in a *callejón*, the same holds true: its name is sufficient to identify all the dwellers and shopkeepers within.

The *callejones* perform the dual functions of linking barriadas to the larger city and protecting them from the polis, standing in opposition to it, fostering a sense of identity and belonging, as well as protection and privacy. In most cases, the strolling pedestrian does not wander into a callejón; but if an "outsider" does happen to enter, residents are immediately put on alert and the visitor is made aware of his transgression. In plan, then, the *callejones* are calligraphic figures or gestures cutting through the city block; in elevation, they comprise a scenographic mingling of private dwellings, shop fronts, and the paved space where public life is acted out. As such, the *callejón* is symbol and model for communal life, and as such, it promises to be a resource of undeniable potential for contemporary urban intervention and architectural design.

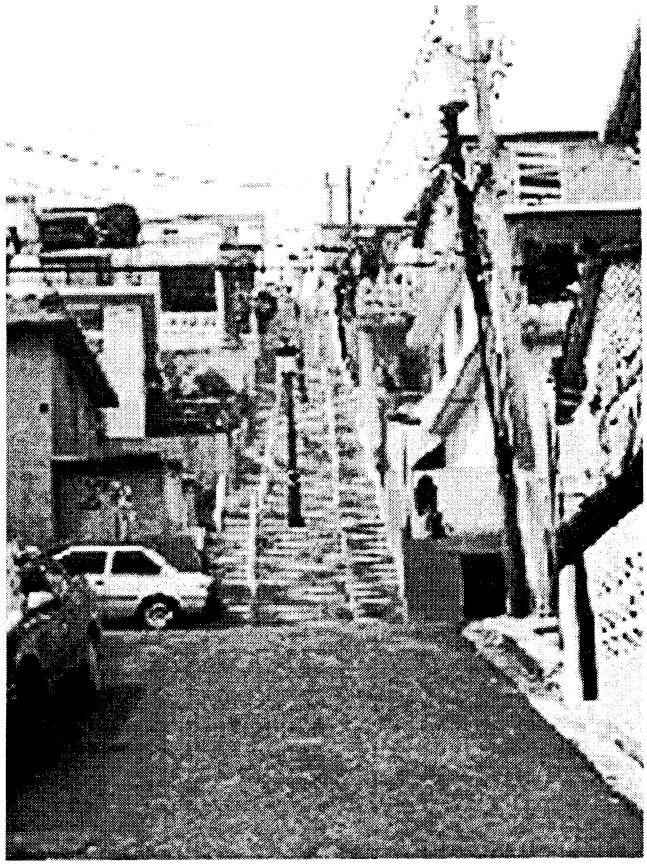

Fig. 1. Steps at Gurabo.

It is common to confuse *callejones* with *escalinatas*, or open-air stepped accesses, in spite of certain formal differences between the two typologies. In Puerto Rico, some of the best escalinatas are those of Gurabo, Vega Baja, Aguadilla, and Yauco.

These towns are bordered by *barrios*, which grew up at the base of the foothills that frame them. As a continuation and reassertion of circulation patterns belonging to each town, the *escalinata* seems to join the basic grid to a sloping topography in each case. Stepped passageways usually exhibit three zones along their length: a wide central area, and two adjoining spaces that are secondary in nature. Houses fronting on *escalinatas* typically exhibit a transitional space, however minimal, and the steps themselves become less and less urban in character as they rise.

Another typology comes to mind at the mention of the *callejón*: the *pasaje*. This truly interior form is usually covered, and is most often situated inside another structure, but boasts a small façade or *frontón* facing the street to signal its entrance and presence.

In contrast to the *callejón*, the *pasaje* is the result of conscious planning and design. Unfortunately, many of these have already disappeared in Puerto Rico, like the Paris arcades which were in ruins so soon after they were built. The Pasaje Matienzo in Old San Juan, and the Pasaje García in Santurce are among the best remembered.

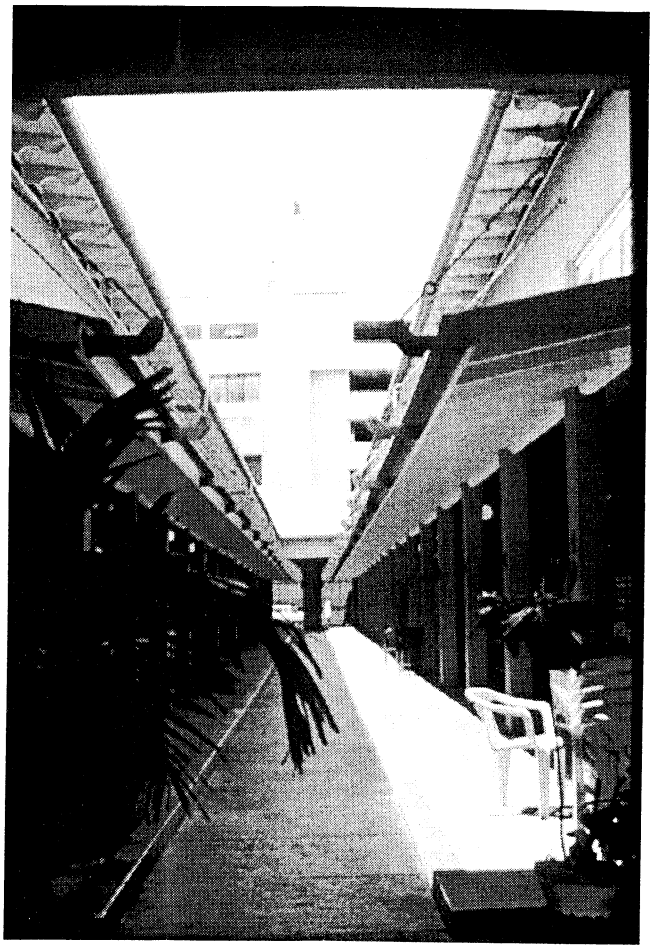

Fig. 2. Plaza de los Perros at Ponce.

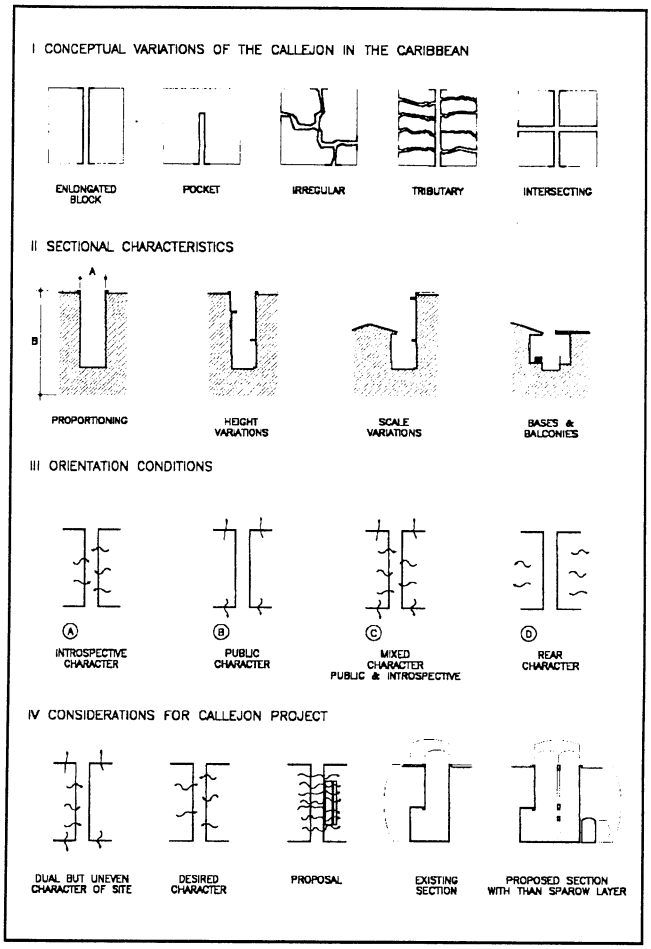

Fig. 3. Typological analysis.

Just as the *callejón* has not been the subject of a historical study per se, neither has it been subjected to typological analysis. Thus, the following diagrams were produced in a first effort to codify the basic forms observed thus far. They are revealed to be graphic figures in plan, a kind of *urban calligraphy* written with the footsteps that originally marked out the path of the *callejón*.

If history has ignored the *callejón*, it nonetheless seems to be perpetuated within the realm of fiction, where it is as often portrayed as the scene of sordid human behavior as it is the idyllic refuge from more typically urban places. In fact, today *callejones* often play host to local crime and drug cultures, and the charming ones in Old San Juan can become at dusk another worldóone with which the police are all too familiar. Curiously, police records of "incidents" taking place in the *callejones* of Puerto Rican cities have not been studied systematically by historians, and documents such as early maps that show the location of the earliest manifestation of some of the still-extant *callejones* have not been identified and catalogued. It is clear that a documentary history is the ideal next step in pursuing an understanding of the *callejón* as a unique urban form.

A systematic examination of growth patterns common to Caribbean cities where *callejones* sprang up was pursued. In Puerto Rico, like Cuba and the Dominican Republic, the first plazas were lined with historizing facades that sketched out huge city blocks. In the colonial period, around newly laid-out plazas arose structures evocative of the Roman *insula* typology, with ground floor dedicated to trade and commerce, and upper levels dedicated to residential use. As these structures proliferated until they eventually surrounded the principal plazas, urban blocks consolidated as a by-product of population growth and in response to planning strategies. In Puerto Rico, the cities of San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, and Arecibo best exemplify the process. Large and generously proportioned blocks developed laterally at a rapid rate, but were often slower to develop in depth, leaving gaps at their cores where footpaths were soon to form. These paths or access routes take shape almost accidentally, as improvised connections or *atajos* (short cuts), random as well as logical cuts by which a path is shortened wherever possible. As short cut between two points, the *callejón* becomes an urban phenomenon of a basically pragmatic order. Most of them in fact, originally claimed their identity through the daily use (or abuse) of an empty lot, a leftover gap between two structures and unchecked access to private property. These fostered internal articulation and eventually settlement at a more reduced scale and of secondary character in relation to the street, like dead-ends, pockets, and of course *callejones*.

Dwellers of houses and apartments in the *callejones* were initially those who, for practical reasons had to remain in the city but could not really afford to. Rents for lots fronting on *callejones* were typically lower than those fronting on streets or plazas. As part of the migration of rural dwellers into the cities of Puerto Rico in the first half of this century, public space in the city grew progressively scarce and private space increasingly expensive.

What we insist on properly calling *callejones*, as explained before, owe their existence to the natural tendency or desire to shorten distances across city blocks of considerable size and length. This explains why small towns typically lack examples of the prototypical form. However, *callejones* also appear at the point where the city grid appears to weaken, disintegrate, or vanish altogether: at that "frontier" where a town's urban personality turns into a less urbanized, even semi-rural context. At these points in the

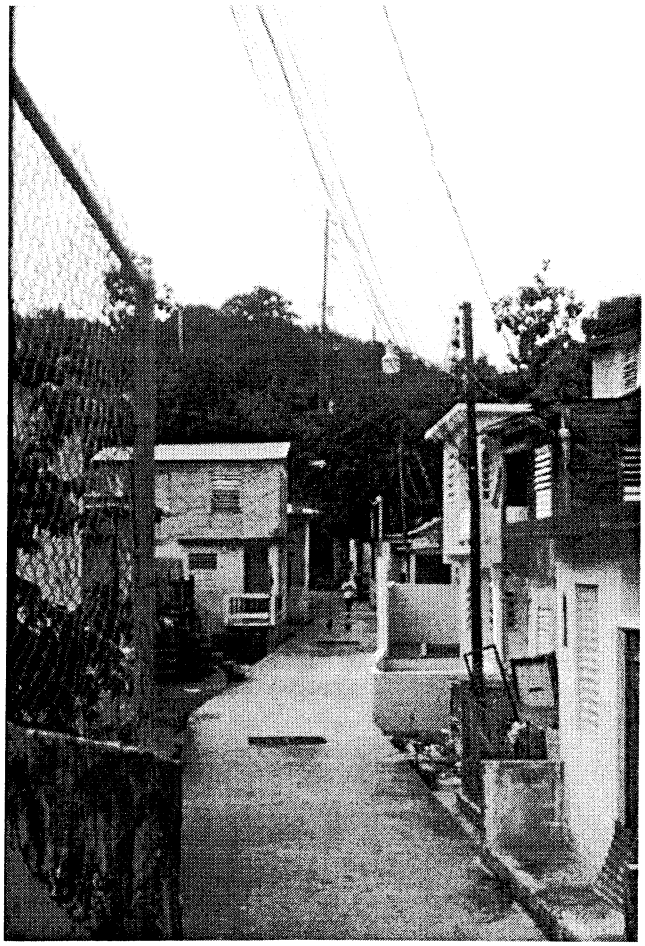

Fig. 4. Callejón La Jolla at Aguadilla.

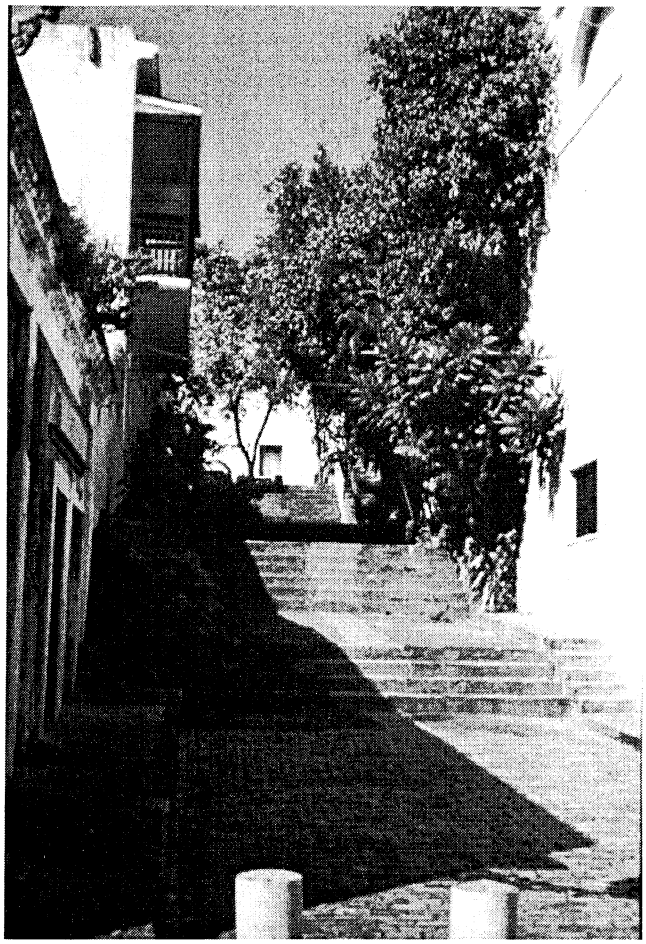

Fig. 6. Callejón del Hospital at Old San Juan.

Fig. 5. Satiric Set from Serlio's Tutte le opere d'architettura, Book II, chapter 3, fol. 26.

periphery of the urban zone, low-cost and less consolidated housing is usually found. And, as a consequence of purposeful acts of cutting – or "hacking," to use Benjamin's terminology — through the urban fabric to create access to dwellings and shops, these spaces have been endowed with another communal value: communication and socialization characterize them to such extent that they have been censured as sites of political foment.

Comparison of *callejones* throughout Puerto Rico revealed the taxonomic breadth of the project undertaken, and at the same time suggested the need to narrow the focus. In Old San Juan, Callejón de las Monjas connects Calle Sol and Caleta de las Monjas, cutting across an elongated block west of the old city, and negotiating a level difference through steps, with generous landings occurring along its descent. Houses are lined up along one side, with a former convent to the other. Callejón del Hospital exemplifies a similar condition. An example that retains similar proportions is the Callejón de la Calle Tanca, running from Boulevard del Valle to Calle San Sebastian. Examples from Old San Juan, in an excellent state of conservation, boast steep, continuous, flanking elevations that do not run exactly parallel to one another. The resulting inflexion of space at times grants oblique and at other times frontal views of the space-defining facades.

Translation of something that exists in the realm of things (reality as it is experienced) into a concept (the idea), that is, the transformation of what we see into discourse, or an explanation of what we understand it to be, expands our knowledge of society and its potential. This was the point of Serlio's perspective and scenographic street scenes, which were intended to expand the architectís understanding of prototypical urban artifacts and architectural forms: the ordinary street, the idiosyncratic façade, the loggia, the stair, and the balcony. He understood their potential to enrich contemporary design praxis.[10] Susan BuckMorss, in her study of Walter Benjaminís

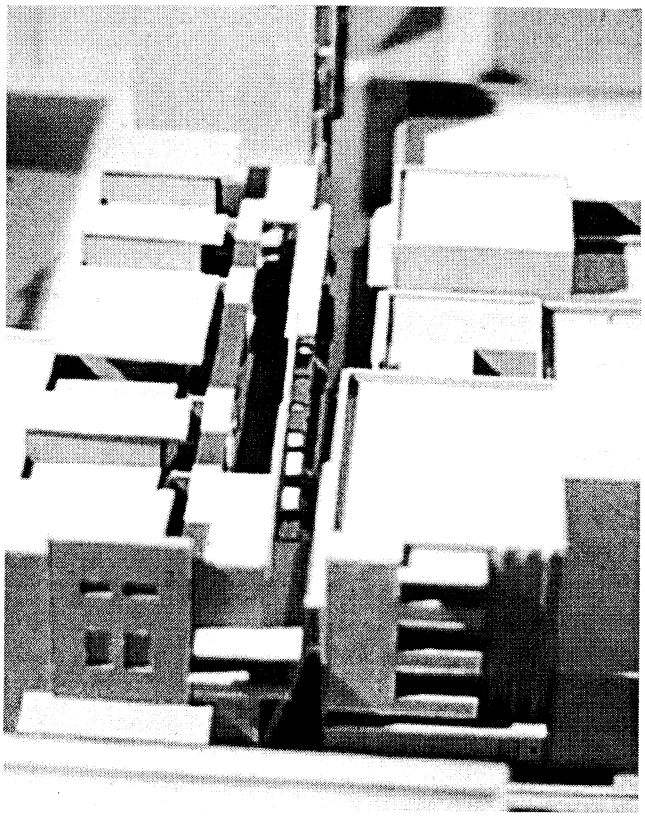

Fig. 7. Scale model for callejón proposed in Río Piedras.

writings on the city, mentions "the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points concretely, with reference to the world outside the text."[11] The careful study and documentation of previously unrecorded urban conditions like the *callejón* is understood to be a task equally vital to the unraveling of our cities' histories and their possible futures.

As complement to and extension of the foregoing research initiative, and because architects often approach history from the drafting table, a design project was the next step. It was developed in light of, and based on, the historical and typological findings, and it was intended as a means of testing or validating certain of those findings. The interest in "testing" and "validating" the research did not, of course, overlook the apparent contradiction between seeking a site on which to intentionally build an urban artifact — the *callejón* — that is virtually *defined* by its spontaneous eruption in the urban fabric. This contradiction was instead seen as a challenge to improve the milieu of a given town through better understanding of the prototype whose artificial development might be as aleatory as the natural and long-term development of its historical precedents.

For this next phase, several urban centers were surveyed with the intent of identifying an appropriate site. Río Piedras was chosen as the location, a town where the archetypal *callejón* is integral to the urban experience. There, Callejón Borinquen, typically elongated in plan and narrow in section, seemed ripe for intervention. It was still active as a pedestrian connector, though its identity had worn thin over time and programmatic proposals for the site contemplated enhancing its social potential. Formerly known as Callejón González, decades ago it led directly to the trolley station, and functioned as the urban edge of Río Piedras. Its northern face was largely occupied by the blind, lateral wall of a movie house whose southern side included several residences and apartments above a ground floor dedicated to commercial use. The theatre's blank northern face, because its gridded structure lent itself to such intervention, was opened up and developed as a transparent plane, behind which a secondary open

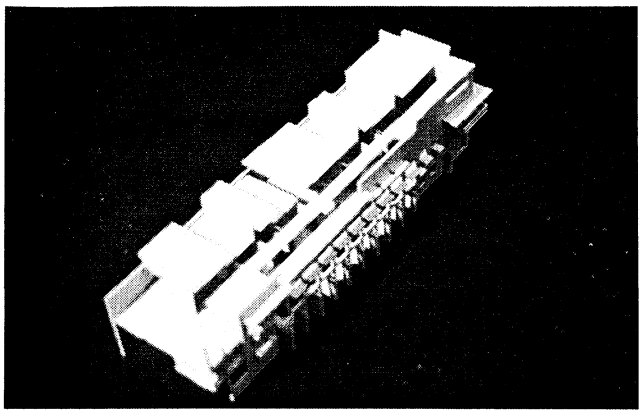

Fig. 8. Project Proposal for *Callejón* Borìnquen at Río Piedras.

zone was developed with an arcade positioned farther back. This layering of the planes was intended to foster spatial extension and definition, as well as expanding the range of activities currently sponsored in the *callejón*. New housing stock was provided and simultaneously granted a semi-private transitional area that shielded residents from direct exposure to public circulation. Insistent horizontal articulations were pursued to scale down the project's elevations. The deliberately pared-down, contemporary vocabulary emulated the restrained concrete expression that had prevailed in the area during the 1940s. Most of the traits and criteria that have been shown to define the *callejón* in the region of the Hispanic Caribbean were addressed in the design process to establish Callejón's Borinquen's urban densification and re-identification, even if certain priorities had to be established and upheld throughout the design process.

Modern life, and in particular, the automobile have relegated many *callejones* to oblivion, heralding their decay, dereliction, and even disappearance. However, those distinctive and efficient enough to survive, like Callejón Borinquen in Río Piedras, still claim relevance within the physical fabric and social texture of the city, even though their "image" has suffered due to the fact that crime and vandalism have gripped them up to the present. If law enforcement agencies have all but given up on them due to the crime factor, it is up to architects and urbanists to flag their potential as models for new modes of densification and as symbols of communal life. For architects intent on restructuring and rejuvenating urban life, the variants on the prototype provide ample terrain for design exploration. A child's memories of the old city, of the *callejón* where his grandmother's home was found, now promisesóbeyond nostalgiaóto give assurance of the spatial, social, and cultural bearing this urban artifact may have on future urban architecture of the Caribbean.

NOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Naples," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 165-167.

[2] As Buck-Morss comments on Benjamin's writings on the arcades, "Surely these earliest, ur-shopping malls would seem a pitifully mundane site for philosophical inspirations. But it was precisely Benjamin's concern to bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns." Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 3.

[3] Benjamin, "Naples," p. 164.

[4] For example, see *Los gallos peleados* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1988), which looks at the cockfighting tradition, *and Contra la corriente: seis microbiografias en los tiempos de España* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1995), which deals with the lives of the disenfranchised.

[5] Sebastiano Serlio, Book II, *Tutte l'opere d'architettura* (Paris: Jean Barbe, 1545), chapter 3, fol. 17.
[6] Benjamin, "Naples," p. 168-171.
[7] Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory. The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), p. 13.
[8] Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections,* p. 147.
[9] Benjamin, "Naples," p. 166.
[10] I owe Denise Bratton for her illuminating references and comments on this specific subject.
[11] See especially Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing.*

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