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A call for a multi-directional approach to a Latino Heritage Conservation initiative in New York City

Introduction

Oftentimes minority groups' contribution to or involvement in the built environment or historic events is understated (or completely omitted) when it comes to its recognition as a historic landmark. In its origin, Historic Preservation focused on the rich and famous, important (and white) political figures in American history. African-Americans and the theme of slavery were distorted for years in the interpretation of Colonial Williamsburg; it took more than a century to recognize the Native Americans in the renamed Little Bighorn Battlefield. We've come a long way from that with the recognition of intangible heritage, African-American, Native Americans preservation initiatives, grassroots level preservation initiatives, etc. And yet, many minority groups are still being under- and misrepresented in the field; this is especially true of immigrants whose native language is not English.

The notion and the need to incorporate cultural diversity in Historic Preservation, albeit not a recent development is now considered mainstream. The growing number of nominations of ethnic minorities' cultural heritage and properties to the National Register, the reoccurrence of the topic of diversity at the National Trust's National Preservation Conferences (Lee 2004), and the National Trust's African American, Japan-town, and most recently the Latino Heritage Preservation Initiative attest to this shift in the field. This last one began on September of this year with the New York Conversación, a gathering of professionals and community members at El Museo del Barrio to discuss what the initiative should be and how it applied to NYC. This essay is born out of the questions asked by Tanya Bowers, Director for Diversity at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, along the line of how preservation could benefit the Latino communities, the answers provided by the professionals, and the fact that noticeably few community members participated in the Conversación. Options given by the professional preservationists and planners ranged from landmark designations, to commemorative plaques on buildings, to a bodega museum; the community members that attended (the majority of them were Puerto Ricans) spoke about

the need to address the American ignorance of Puerto Rican and Latino cultures, displacement issues, pan-Latino ethnicity, and the need for a revision of designation reports that omit or misrepresent the contribution of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos to the city's history.

Latino communities have continually existed in NYC since the 19th century; historically less in numbers than Italian, Irish, German, Jewish, and Polish communities. Studies in the city's multiculturalism, urban development and gentrification have seldom focused on the impact to Latinos.[1] Today Latinos in NYC and the rest of the United States have become a majority within the minority groups, a growth that is expected to continue in future years. In order to establish a successful Latino preservation initiative, like that desired by the National Trust, and to be able to answer questions like '*how can historic preservation help the Latino community?*' one must first investigate what preservation has done for this community in the past. An understanding of the successes and failures of historic preservation within these communities in New York City is necessary if we are to move forward.

[1] Arlene Dávila, "Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City," University of California Press (2004).

Literature Review: Views on preservation of Puerto Rican and Latino heritage

Discussions on the preservation of minority communities are ongoing. The topic's popularity keeps growing, yet the approach and the implementation of preservation practices, namely landmark designation, have not evolved to adapt accordingly. In '*Making Historic Preservation Relevant for the Next 50 Years'* a speech by Donovan D. Rypkema presented at the 2009 National Preservation Conference in Nashville, Rypkema spoke of the increasing nomination of places of importance to local communities to the "This Place Matters" program, many of which don't have great architectural value but nonetheless are still cultural beacons to the community they inhabit. In such places where significance lies in the community's use of the building for their purposes, and not in its bricks and mortar type, there is a certain disconnect between the reason something is important and the approach to its preservation, which oftentimes takes the form of a systematic following of the architectural preservation guidelines established by the federal, state or local organizations in control.[2] According to Rypkema, the authenticity of a naturally evolving place of local significance is put at risk when the traditional constraints of material substitution, renovation, additions, and the revision process that come along with landmark designation and/or National Register inclusion hinder its future evolution to meet the community's needs. Within the same frame of thought, community outreach coordinator for the Los Angeles Conservancy Karina Muñiz calls for the incorporation of multiple narratives and the value of the community's contribution in the evaluation of significance. Muñiz questions whether longtime residents who have shaped their built environment continue to have a stake in how it evolves, and whether they can preserve what matters to them; how can historic preservation improve their quality of life? Although based in Los Angeles, her questions resonate and are applicable in New York City, where designated buildings in Latino neighborhoods focus on their architecture and earlier history and demographic, but seldom include a narrative on the Latino contribution to the building's significance.

[2] Donovan D. Rypkema, "Making Historic Preservation Relevant for the Next 50 Years" *Forum Journal* 24.3 (2010: 11-18) Print.

Unlike the East Coast, in the West and Southwestern part of the United States, where Hispanic settlements predate other European-American settlements, there exists an abundance of historic architecture and resources that are attributed to the Hispanic peoples and other Latinos; they have actively shaped the built environment in that area. Interestingly, one of the examples Muñiz uses in her article, The Wyvernwood Garden Apartment Complex in East Los Angeles, represents a situation that can be observed in New York City. Wyvernwood, completed in 1939 and originally inhabited solely by a white community, has long since become home to over 6,000 Latino residents –for the most part working class Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Central Americans and of Quiché (Mayan) descent. The complex is being threatened for demolition to be replaced by a higher density development that would ultimately "displace longtime residents, and destroy its historic layout and park-like setting."[3] Although it has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places "as a successful example of design intended to foster community", community members, grassroots organization with help from the National Trust have taken the task of demonstrating with a series of videos and activities that Wyvernwood's significance goes beyond its design success. Its sense of place and cultural significance is dependent on the vibrant community that inhabits it, that has shaped it for decades. To save Wyvernwood for its design merits only, and the restrictions that would entail, would be tantamount to displacing the community in favor of the new and denser development.

In New York City where, like Wyvernwood, the built environment in neighborhoods like East Harlem, Lower East Side, Red Hook, Chelsea, and Los Sures (Williamsburg) has been appropriated for almost (in some cases over) half a century by Latinos, the narrative of their settlement should be relevant in the buildings' histories. Are *casitas* and community gardens, created by the Latino community, to be the only truly Latino heritage the city recognizes? Should buildings like P.S. 64 in the Lower East Side and P.S. 72 in East Harlem, both rescued from abandonment and deterioration by the Latino community, turned into local cultural institutions active for over 20 years, be recognized as landmarks only for their

[3] Karina Muñiz, "Este Lugar es Importante: Embracing Diverse Perspectives on Significance" *Forum Journal* 24.3 (2010: 41-46) Print. 43

architectural value? How many years does it take for the Latino community to have an acknowledged claim over the built environment in their neighborhoods?

Rypkema and Muñiz are actively challenging the preservation community, its professional practitioners to embrace this shift in perspective towards inclusivity. Puerto Rican architect and urban planner Luis Aponte-Parés also challenges preservationists to look beyond architectural monuments to the bigger urban cultural landscape of Latino neighborhoods in NYC that have been mainly recorded in books and not identified for preservation. According to Aponte-Parés:

> The contribution made by Puerto Ricans to the built environment of New York City has not been studied. In fact, for the new majority of New Yorkers –people of color and new immigrants– the built environment of the city has no apparent relationship to their history; in other words, they are guests in someone else's city. Except for a recent attempt by New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission to begin to recognize important places in the South Bronx, Queens, and Harlem, preservation efforts have been directed primarily toward the preservation of the history of European descendants. Even those buildings being preserved in the Bronx have little association with the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City.[4]

By law landmark designations in New York City are on the basis of five categories: cultural, social, economic, political, and architectural; a disproportionate majority of designations are based on architectural value alone.[5] Although Puerto Rican presence in NYC dates to the late 19th century, construction in the city, largely by European immigrants, predates the formal establishment of Puerto Rican and other Latino enclaves which occurred after 1920. According to journalist Kemba Johnson, there is a lack of recognition of the built history of non-whites in New York. She states:

> Of the almost 1,000 landmarked buildings in the city, about 100 are in communities of color. Only 16 earned their laurels based on their non-white historical or cultural value; the rest were landmarked because they had significance to white people who

[4] Luis Aponte-Parés, "Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios: Preserving Contemporary Urban Landscapes." *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*. Ed. Arnold R. Alanen & Robert Z. Melnick (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 2000) 214.

[5] Kemba Johnson, "The Struggle to Landmark African-American New York." *City Limits Magazine* (23.7 1998) Web. November 2010.

> used to live there. And of the 750 blocks now protected by historic districts, only 135 are in black or Latino neighborhoods.[6]

On the other hand both Johnson and Aponte-Parés make the observation that community opposition (Johnson) or the absence of Latino preservation groups (Aponte-Parés) are part of the reason for the scarcity of designated landmarks in minority neighborhoods. Regardless of the benefits of preservation such as retaining an important sense of history, place-making, increased commercial value, readily available space for rehabilitation and reuse; it is still perceived as a commodity. In minority communities where the need for affordable housing, education, and food require the built environment to continuously evolve; traditional restrictions that come along with landmark status are burdens these communities cannot afford. When landmark designations, coming from outside entities, don't acknowledge the community's contribution to the history (even a fairly recent one) of the building, the structure acquires the status of an historic 'art object' and becomes foreign to the community that fostered it. Another key issue is 'ownership' and its role in the bigger picture; when the minority community did not own the building at the time of its main period of significance or after landmark status has been granted, they are more likely to lose control of the building. Speaking of the Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club in Harlem, sites of significant events in African American history, Howard Dodson says that their claim to the buildings "is as squatters' rights more than anything else" (Johnson).

The absence of Puerto Rican and other Latino groups' voices and representation goes beyond the lack of organized groups devoted to advocating and promoting historic preservation. In *From Urban Village to East Village* author Janet L. Abu-Lughod acknowledges that within the chapters related to the contesting communities against gentrification of the LES, there is an absence of the Puerto Rican voice. She notes:

> Our treatment is not exhaustive. Among the many communities we do *not* discuss specifically are Cooper Square, GOLES, Rain, Charas, etc. Unable to do justice to the complexity of organizations on the Lower East Side -a suitable topic for another book- we have chosen to focus on the framers of the cross-subsidy plan because of its

[6] Johnson

> centrality to the topic of this book. We are very conscious of the fact that we are missing an important analysis of the internal political organization of the local Latino community. Our attempts to locate a researcher able and willing to work in this community ended in failure; the absence of the Puerto Rican voice remains a defect in our analysis.[7]

The case studies that follow presented in chronological order and from the standpoint of the different issues previously mentioned, present the observed tendencies of the history of preservation of Latino neighborhoods in New York City. The examples range from the beginning of the 20th century where an 'unofficial preservation', i.e., community-based adaptive re-use of abandoned and/or empty places and spaces was the norm, to the later more official and organized preservation groups' involvement in the matter. They represent a certain shift from early community efforts of establishment and empowerment, to what Arlene Dávila refers as 'minority representation'. This research is not all-encompassing; the case studies were selected from the literature reviewed and focus greatly on the history of Puerto Ricans. Given the present predominance of other Latino cultures in the neighborhoods discussed, the research is relevant to the bigger Latino Heritage Preservation theme.

Background: The Community-building Process

In the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City the years 1917-1950s mark a process of community building; the episodic migration through which Puerto Ricans arrived explains the initial slowness of this process and the overall dispersion of these communities. According to Christopher Mele "except in East Harlem and parts of Brooklyn, Puerto Ricans never achieved the critical mass needed to overwhelm an entire neighborhood"[8] their settlement patterns were gradual. Their enclaves in Chelsea and the Lower East Side, "initially satellite barrios" began with a few apartments within an existing –mostly vacant and cheap due to its

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[7] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, Ed. *From Urban Village to East Village: the Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994) 216.

[8] Christopher Mele, "Neighborhood 'Burn-Out': Puerto Ricans at the End of the Queue" *From Urban Village to East Village: the Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, Ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994) 129.

poor condition- building, followed by a few buildings in the same block, and later by a few blocks within the neighborhood; these settlements were dictated less by cultural ties to established Puerto Rican enclaves than by the availability of inexpensive vacancies.[9] Low-income housing shortage, the constant displacement of Puerto Ricans caused by urban renewal, the dispersed nature of their settlements, and the ease of traveling back and forth from the Island to the City are factors that inhibited the early creation of unified community organizations and leadership that dealt with the poor housing situation.[10] Nonetheless a great number of social, cultural and political clubs, Hispanic theaters, restaurants, bodegas, bookstores, music stores, dry-cleaners were created and managed by Puerto Ricans throughout the city. Housed in existing buildings within the different neighborhoods these clubs and businesses, their signs and symbols, depicted the presence of Puerto Rican culture; they were places of cultural bonding and support.[11]

From the 1960s -1980s, the enclave that grew in the Lower East Side was a result of the Puerto Ricans' appropriation of an urban wasteland, abandoned by younger generations of European immigrants in favor of the suburbs and fallen into deep disrepair and ruin. By the late 1960s three Puerto Rican cultural institutions were created: *El Museo del Barrio* and *Taller Boricua* were located in El Barrio; the later would occupy the abandoned P.S. 72 in the late 1970s. In the Lower East Side the socio-cultural institution Charas occupied the abandoned P.S. 64 school building and renamed it *El Bohío*. These community institutions along with groups like The Young Lords would marked a period of community activism where Puerto Ricans laid claim to their environment in the city. By 1976 disinvestment, white flight and 'planned shrinkage'[12] had left "100 vacant lots and 150 vacant buildings in the thirty-six-block area between Avenue A and the East River and between Houston and

[9] Mele 129.
[10] Mele 131; Glazer, Moynihan 86-136.
[11] Aponte-Parés 110.
[12] Policy initiated in the early 1970s by the New York Housing and Development Administrator, in which the city would cut all spending on services such as fire stations and public schools in poor neighborhoods, making these sections of the city uninhabitable and forcing people to leave so that the city could bulldoze these areas (qtd. in Laó-Montes, Dávila 295).

14th street."[13] In an active effort to claim this terrain in light of the imminent threat of gentrification of this prime area between Greenwich Village and SOHO, Latino residents of the area now known as Loisaida (Spanish shortening of Lower East Side) launched a campaign to seize and improve many of these abandoned buildings and lots under the motto "*Mejore, no se mude.*" ("Improve, Don't Move").[14] With the help of housing organizations like Interfaith Adopt-A-Building over thirty buildings were rehabilitated during 1970s,[15] over 25 community gardens –many with *casitas* –[16] and numerous murals were created. These were insertions (and assertions) of the Latino population, under the umbrella of Puerto Rican culture and its symbols, present and active in the community. The importance of the preservation of this working-class neighborhood, the ideology of self-improvement and rootedness, and the need of its protection against developers was expressed through the adaptive re-use of existing buildings into places of Latino community. The subsequent commemoration of many saved and restored buildings as great achievements for and by the community is further proof of their significance to this community; as stated by Ševcenko:

> Beginning in 1978, Adopt-A-Building organized a Three King's Day parade in the neighborhood… Before the beginning of each year's parade, Adopt-A-Building announced the "Miracles of Loisaida" for the previous year. These were most often buildings, empty lots, or other urban spaces that had been successfully rehabilitated. The parade would process these miracle sites and hang a banner on each that read "I am a miracle of Loisaida."[17]

What's in a name?

Amidst the constant struggle of Puerto Rican and other Latinos' claim on the urban spaces they inhabited, the appropriation by way of naming communities and/or streets within them was another tactic –a powerful one– they used from 1950. These were markers; they identified the territory as distinct and asserted the major presence of Latinos. The name

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[13] Qtd. in: Liz Ševcenko, "Making Loisaida: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan" *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, Ed. Augustín Laó-Montes & Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press 2001) 295.
[14] Qtd. in: Ševcenko 307.
[15] Ševcenko 307.
[16] For information on casitas see Aponte-Parés, Joseph Sciorra & Martha Cooper 156-168.
[17] Ševcenko 309.

El Barrio was (and still is) used to identify the predominantly Latino neighborhood of East Harlem. "Although by the 1920s East Harlem already housed the majority of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos living in New York, the name El Barrio was not yet commonly applied to it;"[18] the name became of common use to designate that area after 1950.

The renaming of the section of the Lower East Side north of Houston to 14th street and from Avenue A to the East River happened in response to developers and real estate professional coining the terms East Village and Alphabet City. According to community organizer Chino García these names were used in order to make the area more attractive for outside investments, for the gentrifiers;[19] it was a disassociation the area from the working-class immigrant neighborhood and community that historically characterized the Lower East Side. The name *Loisaida* was born out of a poem written by Bimbo Rivas in 1974; a Latino reimagining of Lower East Side, Loisaida was an identity, not just a community but as Pupa Santiago describes it was an ideology, "a state of mind, as a type of fight back."[20] In 1987 after much dispute from some residents that it officially portrayed the neighborhood as a homogeneous Hispanic community and excluded other ethnicities, the Mayor's Office allowed the renaming of Avenue C as *Loisaida Avenue*. The concept of a "multi-ethnic, neighborhood-based movement for working-class self-help under Puerto Rican leadership" that was fostered in the 1970s was to its detriment, traded for a representation as a solely Hispanic neighborhood.[21]

Other renaming of streets in the city include the 1982 renaming of 116th Street from 3rd Avenue to the East River as Luis Muñoz Marín Boulevard, commemorating the first Puerto Rican-born and democratically elected Governor of Puerto Rico. In 2000, 110th Street between Madison and Lexington Avenues was dedicated as Tito Puente Way in honor of Spanish Harlem-born Tito Puente, known as "The King of Latin Music." In South Williamsburg in Brooklyn there is a street named Borinquen Place running between the corner of Grand St. and Hooper St. and the Williamsburg Bridge. This area, long a Puerto

[18] Ševcenko 294.
[19] Ševcenko 297.
[20] Qtd in: Ševcenko 301.
[21] Ševcenko 311.

Rican and Dominican enclave is known in the community as Los Sures. In a way these names serve as cultural indicators both to the community and to outsiders who visit them. They suggest a preservation of the Latino Culture in a way that preexisting buildings in foreign (to the Latinos) architectural styles cannot. When tenants move out of the buildings whether by choice, displacement, or gentrification, the streetscape will change yet the buildings will most likely remain as they have for decades. The names purposefully given to the streets are memory triggers and markers of a persistent community that is both celebrating their latinidad and presence, and fighting loss of memory of what that particular neighborhood meant to them. Regardless of present and future demographic changes, these names provide a landmark and official claim of the place for the Latino communities to assert their historic presence.

Case Studies: Official Historic Preservation Meets Dwindling Voices

East Harlem has had a continuous Puerto Rican presence since before the 1920s; according to the 1930 census out of 34,715 Puerto Ricans living in Manhattan, 26,118 were concentrated in the Harlem area.[22] That number has more than doubled since, and the area has diversified since the 1970s to include other Latin American and Caribbean ethnicities. The name El Barrio or Spanish Harlem, although not inclusive of all the ethnicities in the area, well represents the predominant demographic of the area. Historic preservation in El Barrio, in the 'designated NYC landmark' or National Register sense, has had little or nothing to do with the narrative of the Latino community. In 1979 a Historic Landmarks Project Coordinator from Tennessee submitted a nomination form for *El Barrio Historic District* to the National Register of Historic Places; it was never listed, according to community activist Marina Ortiz because the neighborhood "did not qualify." The proposed district was located between 99th and 116th streets, roughly bounded on the east by 3rd Avenue and on the west by Madison, Lexington, and Park Avenues. Although it used the name of El Barrio and it did relate the history of Puerto Rican migration to the area (but did not focus on their presence, activism and community-making), the 500 buildings and structures within the boundary are described (not individually, but grouped by typology) solely from an architectural standpoint. The form contains two different stories –of completely different genres- in which *El Barrio* serves to pinpoint a geographical area. According to the form, "the inventoried area contains the only significant portions of El Barrio that have not been demolished, altered beyond recognition, or taken over by other ethnic groups."[23]

In 1992 the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights, owned by the city of New York, was all but completely demolished in order to build an extension of Columbia Presbyterian

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[22] Elsa B. Cardalda Sánchez, Amílcar Tirado Avilés, "Ambiguous Identities! The Affirmation of Puertorriqueñidad in the Community Murals of New York City" *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, Ed. Augustín Laó-Montes & Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press 2001) 268.

[23] Ralph J. Christian (April, 1979) "National Register for Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form: El Barrio Historic District." New York County Hall of Records, NY.

Hospital. Built in 1912, the ballroom "had recorded the history of many ethnic groups in the city, including Jews, the Irish, and, beginning in the 1930s, Hispanics and African Americans."[24] It was cultural and social landmark for the African American and Latino community –two groups with little or no voice in the city's preservation policies;[25] it hosted many festivals and famous musicians for the African American community and it was the place of the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. For the Latino community, the Audubon housed the San Juan Theater where Spanish Language films were shown for decades it is described by Aponte-Parés as a major place that had recorded the cultural history of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the city since the 1930s to its closing in 1980, after which it sat vacant until Columbia's interest in the site. The battle to preserve the Audubon Ballroom, lead by the Municipal Art Society and other preservation groups was able to reach somewhat of a compromise in which a portion of the façade and ballroom where the assassination occurred were to be kept. The primary historical significance of the Audubon was refocused, from a cultural center with a great diversity of ethnic narratives, to the fact that Malcolm X was assassinated there. It is interesting that for a building located in Washington Heights –a predominantly Dominican neighborhood- preservation groups would not also focus on the historic importance of the San Juan Theater. This exclusion from the historic significance speak of the absence of a unified Latino preservation group that would advocate for all Latino heritage in NYC, not just that of their own (be that Puerto Rican, Mexica, Dominican, etc.). From this battle an African American historic preservation group, Landmarks Harlem was created; yet "the absence of Latino preservation groups with adequate monetary and political means to stop this demolition gave city government free reign to ignore Latino history."[26]

The next two case studies are current or recent examples of historic preservation, by way of landmark designation, in which the cultural significance of the buildings are set aside and the focus lies solely in the architectural aspects of the buildings. Mentioned earlier as a socio-cultural institution born in the late 1960s in the Lower East Side, Charas had its quarters along with Adopt-A-Building in the abandoned P.S. 64 building at 605 East 9th Street. The

[24] Aponte-Parés 109.
[25] Aponte-Parés 109.
[26] Aponte-Parés 109.

building was called El Bohío (meaning *hut*- for the historic structures of the Taíno Indians, who were the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico); Charas spent over twenty years restoring the abandoned building to create classrooms, theaters, as well as dance and studio space, providing cultural and educational programs to the entire neighborhood.[27] The city, which in the 1970s had "struggled to rid itself of costly abandoned properties, by the mid 1990s fought to reclaim the now extremely valuable buildings community groups had restored;"[28] Despite several years of the community's protests, in 1999 the city sold the building for $3 million to a private developer, Charas was evicted in 2001. The community, led by City Councilmember Rosie Mendez, then sought historic landmark status for the building to halt the developer's intent of demolition to build a 19-story dorm building, and ultimately try to buy the building and retain one of the last centers remaining from the Loisaida movement.[29] Landmark designation was granted by New York City's Landmark Preservation Commission in 2006 after the developer had started to strip some of the historic architectural features of the façade. Support for the designation included city political officials like the Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer, State Senator Martin Connor, Congressmember Nydia Velázquez, Community Board Three, etc; as well as preservation organizations like Place Matters Project, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, MAS, Landmarks Conservancy, etc. Community participation in the fight for preserving El Bohío differs from that of the Audubon; in this case, the community truly believed the designation would allow them to repossess the building. The community has not been able to acquire the building – vacant since 2001; its fate is unclear, rumors abound that it is to be restored as dorm rooms but no affiliation with a specific university has been made public.

At present, the fate of another Latino cultural institution is in question; the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center[30] (formerly P.S. 72) in El Barrio built by David I. Stagg in 1879-1882 and owned by the City's Economic Development Corporation is going through a Request for Expressions of Interest process at City Council member Melissa Mark-Viverito's request. After an extensive restoration in 1994-95 by architects Lee Barrero and Raymond

[27] Ševcenko 314.
[28] Ševcenko 314
[29] Ševcenko 314.
[30] For more information on the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center, see East Harlem Preservation web page.

Plumey, several spaces within the building have been leased by Latino organizations: Taller Boricua and *Los Pleneros de la 21*. The building was granted landmark status in 1996; the report refers to the building solely as P.S. 72 and aside from the mention of the 1994 restoration, the focus on building's history is as a public school, active until 1975. There is no mention of it being renamed Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center despite the plaque placed in the entrance commemorating the new name, and the original and later architects at the time of the report. Unlike El Bohío, designation of P.S. 72 happened during Taller Boricua's occupation of the building; also unlike El Bohío, the designation report for the latter does not even include the building's use as a community center in El Barrio. Community use of the building is seemingly not at risk, the RFEI seeks to continue the building's use as a theater and event space for the entire community; whereas now some members of the community view Taller Boricua as an antiquated institution that no longer engages the majority of the community and support Mark-Viverito's vision and effort to revitalize the Arts and Cultural scene in El Barrio. The relevance that Taller Boricua has outside of the Puerto Rican community is being questioned; how inclusive is this institution to the diverse community that represents El Barrio. The RFEI is intended to activate the theater space that is not in use due to lack of soundproofing and to make the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center a generator for cultural life in El Barrio. The opposition side to the RFEI views Mark-Viverito's actions as intentionally discrediting Taller Boricua's years of community service and engagement under the guise of revitalizing the artistic scene. Although Taller Boricua "will continue to maintain their own gallery, office and classroom space elsewhere in the building, members and supporters of the organization have vociferously contested the RFEI citing financial hardship, lack of due process, and general disregard for their role as founders of the famed institution."[31] This struggle differs significantly from Charas/ El Bohío, in that according to City Council member Melissa Mark-Viverito:

> This particular chapter in our struggle is about allowing a new generation of artists and cultural institutions into a space that was considered visionary in its origin and is

[31] Virtual Boricua, "The Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center: Art, Transformation, and Political Muscle," *Diary of a Mad Nuyorican*, Blogger, Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

> now seen by many as languishing. While it is understandably painful for all sides, it's time for us to step up to the plate and overcome the complacency that has been choking us. Let it be said that this struggle will open the way to a major turning point for our community in El Barrio/East Harlem.
>
> Opening up these spaces at the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center to the new ideas and perspectives as well as the talents of some of our most vibrant cultural organizations will give them the access and opportunities they need to revitalize our community's cultural life. Our community's legitimate concerns regarding gentrification are being irresponsibly exploited and used as a scare tactic in an attempt to stymie progress and much needed change — change that will re-activate the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center so that it can return to its mission to preserve El Barrio's identity. [32]

According to Viverito, the RFEI would not sacrifice the building's cultural use for the Latino community; yet the top-down approach being taken in the process may ultimately alienate them from the end product.

> Since arriving in New York City in the early decades of the 20th century, Puerto Ricans have defied severe housing problems, involuntary resettlement, or displacement –with the last being the most disruptive. After a half-century of slowly giving shape, character, and meaning to many 'life spaces' in places like East Harlem, the Lower East Side, Bellevue, Chelsea, Lincoln Square, or Hells Kitchen, Puerto Ricans began to lose even this weak control over their environment.[33]

The JBLC, and Charas/El Bohío are examples of cultural beacons of the community that have lost (or are in danger of losing) their social service function for the community. Cases like these bring up the question of whose history is represented when the preserved building becomes inaccessible and/or irrelevant to the community that gave it significance.

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[32] Melissa Mark-Viverito. "Melissa's Latest Statement on the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center." *News from Melissa Mark-Viverito,* Wordpress, 20 Oct. 2010. Web, 8 December 2010.

[33] Aponte-Parés 99.

Criteria, Alternatives and Conclusions

> "Integrated but not assimilated; *part* of but not *of* the United States, U.S. citizens by law but Puerto Ricans first – these are the tensions and contradictions that permeate society at all levels." –James L. Dietz

Our Islands and Their People: as seen with a camera and pencil (1899) was the first book published by the United States after taking possession of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898. Over a century has gone by, within that time many Puerto Ricans have made a life in the US mainland; and yet even in a city such as New York, home of the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the States the disassociation evident in the book's title has continued to this day. Regardless of their historic presence here, Puerto Ricans are still 'they/ them' just as foreign as other Latino cultures that inhabit the city. How can a Latino Heritage initiative take place in a city that doesn't want to acknowledge Puerto Ricans' rightful claim of the urban environment they have settled for almost a century. Historically, architecture in its built form has told the history of a country and its culture; and while Victor Hugo's claim '*This will destroy That*' concerns the printed word, what happens when neither actually tells the tale of a city's evolution?

Prior to the 1980s, during a time of great disinvestment in certain areas of the city like the Lower East Side, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos restored abandoned and severely deteriorated buildings to make a home; a pure act of preservation without any historic designation. Unlike middle class white professionals who did the same in neighborhoods like Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights with the knowledge that they were doing architectural conservation/preservation; the purpose of restoration efforts by Latinos was driven by the need of a readily available and economically feasible space. In a way their intervention was part of the natural evolution of the built structure; an active part of its living (not preserved) history. This adds another layer to the building's history, one just as important as that of the people that built it and later abandoned it. Nonetheless, because Latinos are perceived as 'the other', foreigners only belonging to the recent history of the city their narrative is not acknowledged as deserving of a place in the building's historic significance. In light of the National Trust's Latino Heritage Preservation Initiative, its

success in NYC depends on a twofold approach: on the Latino communities' direct involvement in the process and decision-making as well as the receptiveness of preservation organizations like the Trust and the LPC.

On a grassroots level, the Latino community needs to form a unified front that will bring their voice to the discussion table and advocate for a historic preservation that works for them. Only the Latino community can answer how and what preservation can do for their community by taking a proactive approach to the matter. A unified Latino voice that belong to the community in question would help avoid the pan ethnic classification that occurs when outsiders are the leaders in any intervention of a Latino community. Under the umbrella of latinidad each group's individual struggles would be strengthened, and the community's overall needs would be better met. Instead of ending with a bodega museum as a historic relic frozen in time like suggested in the NYC Conversación, the community's activism and input would have a better chance of preserving the actual bodega as an active and living business and place managed by a member of the Latino community.

As for the official historic preservation organizations, D.D. Rypkema and Karina Muñiz' call for revision of methods and a more inclusive approach is not something that should happen gradually; they are already behind and must catch up quickly. The intention of a Latino Heritage Preservation Initiative is a laudable action of the Trust's, but a nationwide initiative has the danger of generalizing all Latino communities in the US as one group. If an initiative such as this is to take place in NYC, there will have to be various community workshops to gather information on the particular community's historic preservation views and places that matter; unlike the Conversación these workshops should not be by invitation only and should be held at a local community center. The National Trust should empower the community and facilitate local preservation efforts, not lead or establish them.

The narrative of the Latino contribution to landmark designated buildings, especially those within historically predominantly Latino neighborhoods should be well documented in the designation report, not just mentioned in passing. Likewise historic events significant to the Latino community should be considered as possible historic significance of the building

itself. Designations like El Bohío (former P.S. 64) where the focus of the significance relied on its architectural value –possibly to ensure designation by the LPC– should not *have* to occur. The former school should have been designated for what it had become for the community, a beacon of cultural activity and community activism, a case of preservation without having been any official designation; a community landmark long before it was a city one. Today, the significance of El Bohío remains solely in the memories, individual and collective, of those who with all conviction, still call the neighborhood Loisaida. It stands as proof that if preservation is to have any relevance, beyond architectural merit, and persist beyond the present it has to come from within the community itself.

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