

## THE REHABILITATION OF THE SEMINARIO CONCILIAR BUILDING

### IN THE SAN JUAN HISTORIC ZONE:

#### A FIGHT AGAINST ALL ODDS

presented by:

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There are still some who wonder what role government, any government, can play in the conservation of the architectural heritage of a nation. While some may feel that the burden should rest primarily on the government, others believe that only the private sector can effectively carry out such efforts. This paper describes an unique project where cooperation between the private sector and the government resulted in great benefits for the historic preservation movement. Furthermore, it lends support to the notion that government-sponsored help can economically boost and morally support activities of this nature.

In 1983, circumstances indicated that the Seminario Conciliar Building, a huge privately-owned historic building in the San Juan of Puerto Rico Historic Zone, was doomed to an uncertain future -- leading to a complete and pervasive deterioration. During 1983, however, President Reagan sponsored the 1984 Jobs Bill. The main purpose of the Bill was to directly create jobs in the construction field. The Bill channeled these efforts via historic buildings and thus, the National Park Service unit of the United States Department of the Interior. There were many grumbles from the start. The impression many received was that the intention of the Bill was aimed at the creation of construction-related jobs. Some felt that this emphasis was, to a certain extent, misplaced. The issue, some stated, was to stress to the public the viability of using public funds to develop healthy conservation programs. Others felt that the provisions of the Bill were too stringent. After so many years without a government-sponsored program related to the conservation of historic buildings, it was unfair to put many constraints on the program. In particular, the fact that only six months were granted to spend funds was seen as a blow below the belt for some states where climate conditions from January until April made it virtually impossible to carry out any kind of exterior work. In spite of it all, or maybe because of it, Puerto Rico, and I am sure that many other states, felt the need to prove that the program could work out. The strict and limited approach of the program probably created a bond of response to the fact that "we would prove them wrong."

In Puerto Rico many worthwhile buildings were chosen to receive the benefits of this Bill. Among these was a building in the Old San Juan Historic Zone that was destined to be the new site for a university-level academic center.

This project, from its beginnings, attracted our imagination and our commitment. The building, in itself, is one of the finest examples of 19th century architecture in Old San Juan. Its locale, to start with, is a most important one. Located in the justly-famous "museum street" of Calle del Cristo (called that by some due to the many important historic buildings that

lie there), the building covers more than half of one of the historic city core blocks.

But most importantly, the man behind the rehabilitation project was a legend in his own right. Dr. Ricardo Alegría has spent a major part of his life in the pursuit of the creation of a national conscience that would appreciate and conserve Puerto Rico's culture and heritage. Dr. Alegría has been a visionary who has, single-handedly, shaped the conservation conscience of the Island since the foundation of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in 1955, under his guidance. During his tenure at the Institute, innovative philosophies such as tax incentives policies, were created in 1957, anticipating similar policies created much later by the United States Department of the Interior in 1966 (by means of The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966). In 1976, Dr. Alegría founded the Centro de Estudios Avanzados del Caribe at Casa Blanca in Old San Juan, a university-level accredited institution that grants graduate degrees in Puerto Rican studies. By 1983, this old site was too small and uncomfortable for the diversity of activities carried out by the institute; the Centro needed a new locale. Alegría's dream of rehabilitating the Old Seminario Conciliar took shape at this time.

Rarely do we find a building so significant from the rehabilitation viewpoint. The building has a fascinating story that explains its architectural size and form. Although many wished for a formal center of higher education in the Island for years, the construction of the Seminario Conciliar Building was not given its final impulse until the year 1827, under Bishop Don Pedro Gutiérrez de Cos and Captain-General Don Miguel de la Torre. The building which cost "41,000 y mas pesos" (in the currency of the time) was probably designed by Gutiérrez in collaboration with Agustín Cantero, maister builder for the fortifications of the city. The Seminario Conciliar, dedicated to Saint Ildefonso, was built to house a seminar. Construction started in 1827 on a lot next door the Episcopal Palace, which measured 62 x 46.5 varas.<sup>1</sup>

The original building has a severe facade which was composed of seven doors, perceived by the observer as windows due to their height and to the fact that they were covered by rejas abalaustradas.<sup>2</sup> The design, created to suit the steep incline of the site, placed these doors on top of a podium-like structure that slowly metamorphoses into a basement level. In a masterful show of control in terms of the plastic experience, the architects contrasted the severe block-like structure to the sensuous forms of the balaustered rejas. The exquisite portal has a pediment and two coat of arms: one is the royal one and the other one belongs to Bishop Gutiérrez de Cos.<sup>3</sup>

During the tenure of Bishop Don Gil Esteve y Tomás (1848-1855), a lot was acquired on the west side of the building with the idea of expanding the original building. The new building was constructed to house more seminaristas and also to house some students and an order of missionaries. This second building was also fashioned in block form; both blocks were connected by means of a corridor. These spaces are speared in the center by an interior patio or cortile, which aims to provide light and ventilation to the interior. The beauty of these spaces is emphasized by means of the arcades that arch elegantly around the patios, giving the area its graceful sense of proportions and elegance. Morphologically-speaking there are fascinating elements in this building, that are unique examples in the Island. The refectory, for example, presents a unique type of vault, unlike any other in Puerto Rico. The chapel is developed as an octagon with chamfered corners,

crowned by a dome of imposing height and painted with grisaille frescoes dating to the late 19th century.

The building changed hands several times during its history but it was always the property of the Catholic Church. In 1858, for example, it was transferred to the Jesuits and became a center for secondary level studies. Because it was the most prestigious local center, most of the leading cultural figures of Puerto Rico were educated here during the 19th and 20th centuries. As expected, this circumstance was a key one in Dr. Alegría's desire to rehabilitate this historic and venerable center as the locus of the academic institution he directs.

On 1983, Dr. Alegría visited the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office to inquire about possibilities for obtaining funds from the newly-sponsored Jobs Bill. Because the State Historic Preservation Officer, at the time, believed that the small amount allocated to Puerto Rico should have some impact throughout the Island and on as many projects as possible, only \$125,000 were granted to the project. The required one-to-one match was provided by Dr. Alegría by a very small amount of cash and in-kind services and materials (donated by individuals and firms to be used in the building's rehabilitation). The author, who was State Historic Preservation Officer at the time, wondered about the feasibility of developing such a complicated and vast rehabilitation project with such limited funds. It was decided to view this initial funding as part of the general plan of rehabilitation. A clear idea about the difficulties involved can be gained when it is realized that the building covers approximately 144,000 square feet of construction and that the conditions of the building were extremely ruinous.

The building originally was built of masonry (rubble), covered with limestone stucco. This material posed no immediate problem in terms of the restoration process as it was, in most areas, in fairly good shape. Only sections of the north wall showed moisture-related problems. The ceilings, however, were another matter altogether. Traditional roofs in the Old San Juan Historic Zone were created by a simple yet effective system. Beams run in one direction and are embedded into the wall. Over these beams, at right angles, rest wooden alfajías. On top of these alfajías, flat bricks were laid in layers. Finally, a cover was thrown on the exterior. This type of roof needs to be carefully maintained in order to last, a condition that was not evident in the abandoned Seminario Conciliar. More importantly, the embedded ends of the beams in many cases had been affected by the moisture present in the walls (as a result of capillary action or vertical humidity) and had rotted, rendering parts of the roof unsafe for occupation. Historians mention that in the construction of the building, pitch pine (locally called pichipén) was imported and used.<sup>4</sup> Most of the alfajías, built from this material, were useless, having fallen prey to either humidity or termites or both. The beams, having an approximate rectangular section of 6 inches by 12 inches and a length between 15 and 18 feet, were made from local ausubo (a local, precious wood, almost extinct now). They were almost impossible to replace.

Dr. Alegría, short on funds, could not acquire the services of specialized external firms that handle consolidation of wooden structures. It was decided that a beam, called a madrina, was to be added close to the wall to support the beams. The ploy worked and these elements were declared stable by the structural engineers. In some cases, small wooden brackets were also added to certain problematic beams. We must stress the fact that both solutions were innovative historic solutions that had been studied by Dr. Alegría. As solutions, they had been used in this and other much older

buildings. As luck would have it, two important historic buildings were being restored in the vicinity by the local government. Following unfortunate restoration practices, perfectly preserved ausubo beams, marble tiles and other materials were discarded to be replaced by new, if inferior, materials. Dr. Alegría asked that the materials to be thrown out be donated to the Seminario work. Thus he obtained ausubo beams of excellent quality, historic marble tiles and many other fragments which he used to replace ruinous parts of the Seminario.

Final detailing of the project is still going on at the present time. It is remarkable, however, to observe that well under one million dollars have been invested to achieve what is considered by many to be one of the finest local rehabilitation projects in recent times. Needless to mention that common modern cost for such activities is usually much higher, considering the size and special characteristics of the building.

The rehabilitation process provided an extraordinary living workshop for students of art and architecture who visited the site many times to observe the ongoing labor of many skilled craftsmen. It also stimulated the rebirth of a number of long-lost architectural crafts.<sup>5</sup> The success of this project, on the other hand, has kindled the interest of the state government which has just recently started a macro scale rehabilitation project on the Ballajá sector, practically adjacent to the Seminario Conciliar site.

The rehabilitation project of the Seminario Conciliar Building has brought about the conservation of a very important building, the rehabilitation of an important historic structure and has initiated the re-vitalization of a vital urban district within the historic zone. It is with pride that we can look at this building again, as a center of studies. New scholars, walking and working in this centuries-old building, carry on the legacy of higher learning for the benefit of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean basin.

### Footnotes

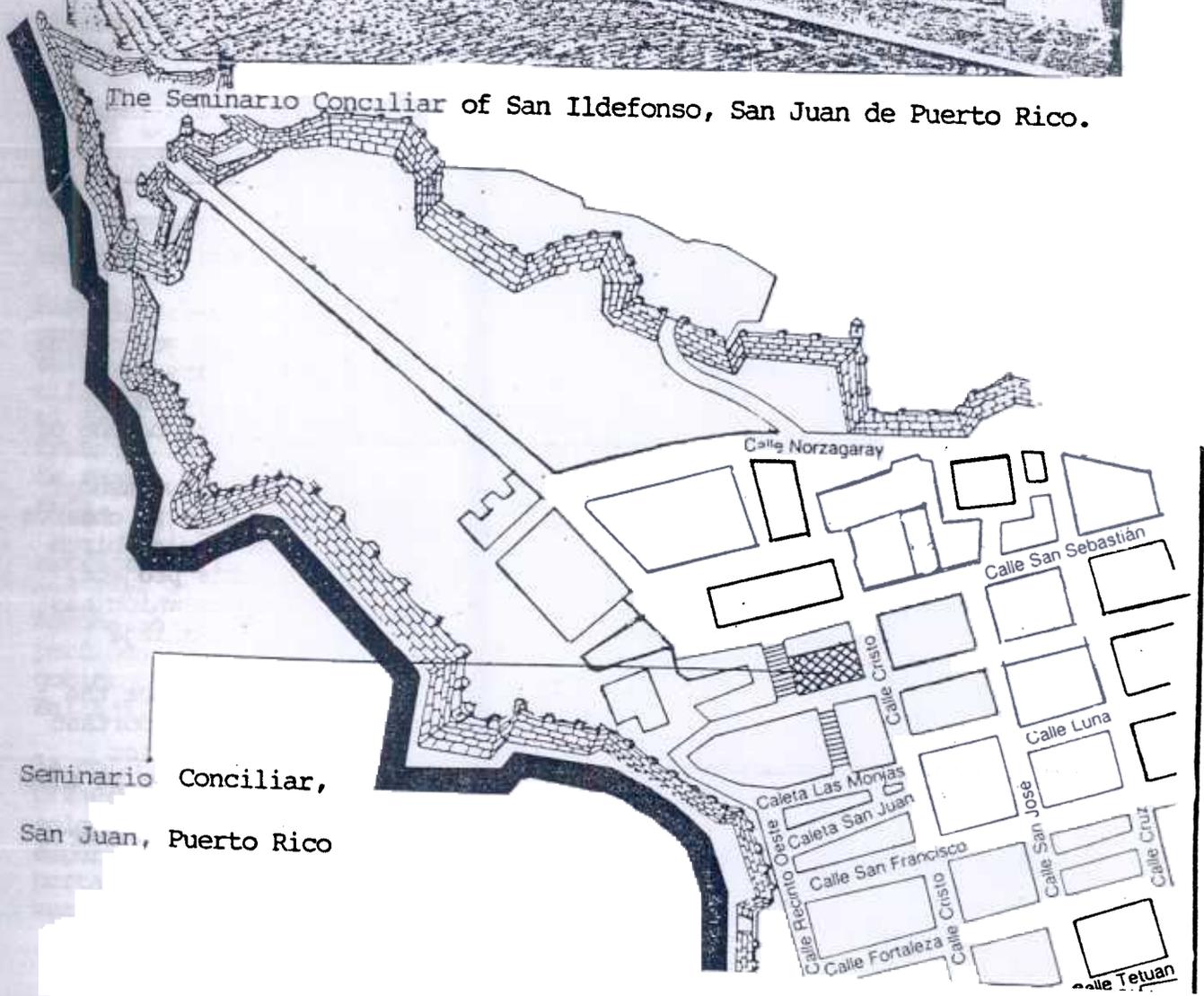
1. Castro, Arquitectura en San Juan de Puerto Rico (siglo XIX), p. 179.
2. When the rehabilitation work on the Seminario Conciliar started, the rejas abalaustradas (wooden balaustered grills) were missing. Old photographs and engravings were used to recuperate the original form of these very important architectural elements.
3. Information obtained at the Archives of the Catholic Church of Puerto Rico (document not numbered).
4. Historical evidence on the use of this material was corroborated by Dr. Alegría upon examination of the alfajías.
5. An important example was the elaboration of all wooden balausters by hand by an old artisan of the interior of the Island, who had worked as a very young man with this kind of technique.

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The Seminario Conciliar of San Ildefonso, San Juan de Puerto Rico.



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San Juan, Puerto Rico

## ABSTRACT

### THE REHABILITATION OF THE SEMINARIO CONCILIAR BUILDING IN THE SAN JUAN HISTORIC ZONE: A FIGHT AGAINST ALL ODDS

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Circumstances indicated that the Seminario Conciliar Building, a huge privately-owned historic building in the San Juan of Puerto Rico Historic Zone, was doomed to an uncertain future -- leading to a complete and pervasive deterioration. This notable building presented extremely important historic and architectural characteristics. It sprawled over almost a complete city block within the historic zone, facing the justly-famous "museum street" Calle del Cristo. It also faced, however, two insidious foes: lack of money and lack of motivation on the part of its owners to do something about its future.

The year 1983 sealed its fate. Dr. Ricardo Alegría, one of Puerto Rico's most influential historians and preservationists became interested in the building. At the same time, the 1984 Jobs Bill, sponsored by President Reagan and the Department of the Interior, fostered a revival of preservation activities by delivering much-needed funds which also provided moral encouragement for conservation activities regarding the architectural legacy of our country.

The structure housed, since 1830, the first center of higher education in the Island. Most of the notable and distinguished Puerto Ricans in the arts and letters graduated from this Institution for many years. Dr. Alegría sought and obtained authority from the owners, the Catholic Church, to pursue all related conservation and rehabilitation activities.

A proposal was submitted to the local State Historic Preservation Office. With an initial grant of just \$125,000 rehabilitation work got on the way. It is remarkable to observe that well under one million dollars were ultimately invested to achieve the rehabilitation of a building covering approximately 144,000 square feet, and what is considered by many to be one of the finest local rehabilitation projects in recent times.

The rehabilitation process provided an extraordinary living workshop for students of art and architecture who visited the site many times to observe the ongoing labor of many skilled craftsmen. It also stimulated the re-birth of a number of long-lost architectural crafts. The success of this project, on the other hand, has kindled the interest of the state government which has just recently started a macro scale rehabilitation project on the Ballajá sector, practically adjacent to the Seminario Conciliar.

The Seminario Conciliar rehabilitation project has brought about the conservation of a very important building, the rehabilitation of an important structure and has initiated the re-vitalization of a vital urban district within the historic zone. It is with pride that Puerto Ricans can look at this building again, as a center of studies. New scholars, studying in this centuries-old building carry out the legacy of higher learning for the benefit of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean basin.

## RESUMEN

### LA REHABILITACION DEL EDIFICIO DEL SEMINARIO CONCILIAR EN LA ZONA HISTORICA DE SAN JUAN: UNA LUCHA CONTRA EL OLVIDO

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Todo parecía indicar que el histórico edificio del Seminario Conciliar de San Ildefonso, localizado en la Zona Histórica de San Juan de Puerto Rico, estaba destinado al futuro incierto del abandono o a convertirse en una ruina total. El edificio, que cubre la mitad del área de un bloque del histórico casco urbano, llevaba mas de quince años abandonado, a pesar de su importancia como ejemplo valioso de arquitectura y escenario histórico del país.

El año 1983 marca un hito. El Dr. Ricardo Alegría, uno de los historiadores y conservacionistas mas prestigiosos de la Isla, se interesó en el edificio. El necesitaba un local para mudar el Centro de Estudios Avanzados del Caribe, institución educativa a nivel universitario, que el dirige. En ese mismo año, se dió la feliz casualidad que el Presidente Reagan presentara un proyecto de ley conocido como el "1984 Jobs Bill," el cual proveía fondos públicos para ser utilizados en la conservación de edificios históricos.

El edificio del Seminario Conciliar fué concluído en el 1830, y fué por muchos años el centro de enseñanza superior mas prestigioso de todo Puerto Rico. La mayoría de los próceres puertorriqueños del siglo XIX, cursaron sus estudios en dicha institución. Motivado por este historial tan significativo, el Dr. Alegría obtuvo autorización de los dueños del edificio, la Iglesia Católica, para rehabilitar el mismo.

A estos fines se solicitó de la Oficina Estatal de Preservación Histórica de Puerto Rico la cantidad de \$125,000, con la cual se inició el proyecto. Es interesante señalar, que los trabajos de rehabilitación del edificio que cubre aproximadamente 144,000 pies cuadrados, no han rebasado la cifra de un millón de dólares. Este hecho es extraordinario si consideramos el tamaño del edificio, sus detalles arquitectónicos y la calidad de los trabajos realizados. Como consecuencia se estima, que es uno de los proyectos de rehabilitación de mayor trascendencia en Puerto Rico durante los últimos años.

El proceso de rehabilitación se convirtió en un taller viviente extraordinario, visitado constantemente por estudiantes de arte y arquitectura que iban al mismo a observar la labor de los artesanos que allí se realizaba. Además se estimuló el renacer de un sinnúmero de artesanías olvidadas, casi perdidas en el pasado. Por otro lado, el éxito del proyecto ha motivado al gobierno estatal a iniciar una revitalización urbana del histórico sector de Ballajá, que se encuentra justo al lado del Seminario Conciliar.

Los trabajos de rehabilitación del Seminario Conciliar son ejemplo de la colaboración creativa entre el sector privado y el gobierno en pro de la preservación de nuestros recursos culturales. Esta colaboración ha logrado no solo conservar un importante edificio histórico, sino inyectar nuevas esperanzas hacia la revitalización de todo un distrito urbano. Los antiguos portales del Seminario Conciliar se han vuelto a abrir -- para abrigar, una vez mas, el proceso educativo de la juventud puertorriqueña.