



**DELUXE  
SQUATTING!**

**LA PARGUERA**



# DELUXE SQUATTERS IN PUERTO RICO: THE CASE OF LA PARGUERA'S CASETAS

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the case of La Parguera, in the Southern coast of Puerto Rico, as an example of a particular type of illegal building: Second homes used mostly for vacation and/or rental purposes, usually called *casetas*. Although illegal building in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Latin America is usually associated with *rescates*, *casitas*, and other forms of squatting by the poor, the present work argues that casetas in La Parguera exemplify a very different phenomenon, one that may be implicated in coastal gentrification and displacement and that is present not only in La Parguera but in other coastal areas of Puerto Rico as well. [Key words: illegal building, gentrification, squatters, Puerto Rico]

# A NUMBER OF PLACES IN PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES PUERTO RICAN BARRIOS

are the result of illegal land occupation, an outcome of the actions of squatter individuals, families, and communities who base their struggle on fundamental human needs and rights to shelter, leisure, safety, identity, and connection.<sup>1</sup>

*Rescate* settlements with names such as Villa Margarita or Villa Cañona in Puerto Rico, and the small wooden buildings called *casitas* in urban centers in the United States, both attest to the efforts and the success of the often disenfranchised individuals, families, and groups who manage to create place, home, and community with scarce resources in the midst of (uneven) development.

The discussion of illegal building in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Latin America tends to refer to popular and/or social movements that seek to obtain living space rendered scarce by policies of economic development that further marginalize the rural and urban poor (Cotto 2006; Eckstein 2001; Escobar 1992; Llanes-Santos 2001). Called *invasiones* by some sectors, the more sympathetic term *rescate* recognizes a moral right to the land, based on the social actors' demonstrated need for housing, upon which a legal right might be constructed (Cotto 2006). In this work, I present a Puerto Rican example, the *casetas* in La Parguera, that stands in clear contrast with the *rescates* usually associated with illegal building in Puerto Rico and that seems to be part of a disturbing trend.

## **Deluxe squatting in La Parguera**

Located in La Parguera, a village of the town of Lajas, in the southern coast of Puerto Rico (see Figure 1), this case of illegal building seems, at first glance, to have elements of both of the types mentioned above; there are around two hundred wooden houses, called *casetas* by residents and visitors, along the coast of the village. They share with the urban, New York *casitas* a certain aesthetic based on an architecture inspired by Puerto Rican vernacular building practices, including the use of wood, balconies, and bright colors, and the national symbolism implied by these features. They also share with some *casitas* and with Puerto Rican *rescates* the basic quality of illegality and a concomitant struggle for legality with the state and its representatives. The argument of the present work, however, is that La Parguera's *casetas* are a very different phenomenon from the type of illegal building exemplified by *rescates* and *casitas* and that in fact their permanence may constitute a threat to, rather than an example of, the social movements associated with illegal building.

Figure 2 is an aerial photo of La Parguera, with casetas visible along its coast. Widely described as a “fishing village” by its residents and visitors and featuring a famed bioluminescent bay, La Parguera has become a tourist center, with an active fishing industry, increasing real estate values, and a large number of tourists and temporary or seasonal residents attracted by its landscape and its opportunities for dining, lodging, relaxation, and water sports (Griffith 2006; Krausse 1994). Many of these seasonal residents own property in La Parguera, mostly apartments in one of three complexes, houses in one of six projects developed after the decade of 1980, and the estimated 200 casetas on the shore, among which I could find only three with full-time resident owners at the time of my fieldwork, done from 1998 to 2000.

Some seasonal residents also own homes in the *parcelas* section of the village, where the Puerto Rican government distributed land lots in the decade of 1940 (Edel 1962; Dietz 1989), and where the core of La Parguera’s permanent residents are located.<sup>2</sup> Houses in the *parcelas* area tend to be less expensive than in other, more upscale areas of the village, but prices of *parcela* property have also gone up since the mid 1980s.



**FIGURE 1.** *La Parguera is a barrio of the Puerto Rican municipality of Lajas in Puerto Rico's southwestern coast. Figure courtesy of Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios del Litoral (CIEL), at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Mayagüez. Reprinted with permission.*



**FIGURE 2.** *Aerial picture of La Parguera, Courtesy of CIEL. Reprinted with permission.*

The casetas are at the center of a current legal battle. An environmental rights organization, *Mayagüezanos por la Salud y el Ambiente*, is trying to stop the owners of two of these stilt houses on the shoreline from rebuilding their casetas after a possibly intentional fire destroyed them (Nieves 2006). In order to rebuild, these owners have requested a special permission from the Department of Natural Resources, made particularly special by the fact that the houses in question—and others like them—never had the necessary permissions to be built in the first place and have had their legal status questioned for decades. Currently numbering close to two hundred, these casetas are wooden structures standing on stilts right in the water; they range from basic, one-room houses with a small balcony and pier, to five-room, two-story houses, with a larger pier or even a boat “garage.” Most of them are used by their owners as vacation homes and/or rentals.

Usually surrounded by mangrove trees and always made out of wood, the casetas have been described as second homes that “allow numerous city dwellers...to indulge in fantasies of living with nature” (Jopling 1988: 176) (See Figure 3). This is perhaps the casetas’ most peculiar feature: Unlike other documented instances of illegal building in Puerto Rico, La Parguera’s casetas do not represent an attempt by the working and usually urban poor to acquire land in which to build their homes. To the contrary, caseta owners and users tend to be seasonal residents, who have been described by the press as “white collar squatters” (Gaud 2006b: 3), and by full-time residents with terms such as “upper class”, “wealthy” and “professional”<sup>3</sup>; they include engineers, doctors, lawyers, business people, and even a federal court judge.



**FIGURE 3.** *A group of casetas. Photo by Rima Brusi-Gil de LaMadrid. Reprinted with permission.*

The location of casetas makes their legal status problematic in terms of both Puerto Rican and federal laws. The 1880 *Ley de Puertos* (Port Law) establishes the *Zona Marítimo-Terrestre* (Marine-Terrestrial Zone, ZMT), which includes the waters’ edge and those portions of land touched by the sea up to the high tide mark. In 1917 the ZMT was declared to be part of the public domain, belonging not to the state (who according to this law must act as an enforcer and guardian of the law) but to the Puerto Rican people (DRN 1985). The state is represented in this guardianship role by agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources (Law 23, 1972, cited in Martínez 1994), created in 1972 to ensure the conservation and protection of the ZMT, and the Puerto Rican Planning Board, that has, as part of its duties, the revision, approval, and monitoring of projects performed in natural reserves (Junta de Planificación 1960, 1978).

The Board in fact produced a document detailing a development plan for La Parguera that included the removal of casetas and their replacement with other recreational structures and activities (Junta de Planificación 1960), but “no action was taken” as a result of this plan, and “uncontrolled development” continued (Krause 1994). Federal law does not favor casetas either: Law 43 regulates the use of and building in coastal waters, and the Clean Water Act of 1972 regulates extraction and filling in U.S. waters, placing the necessary monitoring in the hands of the US Corps of Engineers.

To the extent that the casetas do not comply with legislation, most press reports express little doubt about their illegal status. Class seems to add an additional layer of illegitimacy to the problem of illegality: In contrast with rescate movements in Puerto Rico, which used idle land to provide a primary residence to poor sectors, *caseteros* cannot claim to need their casetas. Casetas’ shaky legal status, their being made out of wood, and their location inside the water and thus being particularly exposed to weather and phenomena such as hurricanes, are all factors that translate into difficulties for prospective buyers to secure things like mortgages and insurance; casetas, however, are bought and sold in the hundreds of thousands of dollars regularly, and some of them are even advertised with local realtors.

The Real Estate Book for the area (realestatebook.com, accessed 3/21/07) includes a two-bedroom caseta, with an asking price of \$350,000. Another caseta, a one-room studio with a loft, is currently for sale at \$250,000. Narratives of the caseta owners I interviewed, in La Parguera in 1998, mention having received offers ranging from \$200,000 to \$500,000 for their casetas, in spite of the fact that the structures have no formal property title. These figures are higher than most other housing of comparable size in La Parguera. In an island where squatters, often otherwise homeless, have been evicted from their only homes many times in recent history (Llanes-Santos 2001; Cotto 1993, 2006), and where the ones who succeed have to fully demonstrate economic need (see, for example, Cobián 2007), how have second-home casetas been able not only to stay, but also to command large sums of money from potential buyers? This question guides the present work, which deals with some of the particular historical and spatial circumstances that I believe explain the continued presence of casetas in La Parguera, despite legal, environmental, and public opinion issues.

I argue that although casetas differ in important ways from other, perhaps more traditional forms of illegal building such as land rescates and urban casitas, they also have been able to use some features of the latter to their advantage, and that they are connected to some of the very processes that illegal building by the poor often tries to correct: gentrification, displacement, and unrestrained development.

#### **“I may live in Mayagüez, but I exist in La Parguera”**

Perhaps weary of potential criticism or understandably impatient to get on with their weekend, *caseteros* were not very responsive to my requests for interviews, and tended to say no, postpone them indefinitely, or keep them short. Not so with Dr. Leny,<sup>4</sup> who was more than willing to show me his caseta and tell me its history, as well as his history in La Parguera. With a dental office established in Mayagüez, one of the big cities nearest to La Parguera, Dr. Leny visited La Parguera for the first time in 1967 and, he says, fell in love right then with the beauty of the landscape. He rented an existing caseta for four years and then rented a room in a local hotel, also on the water:

I was fascinated...[the house] had no access by land, you had to reach it by boat, because of the mangrove. My daughter came to that house for the first time when she was six weeks old.... [Afterwards] we always rented the same room, every weekend, we brought the boat from our house, used it here and took it back with us, [there were] no marinas then.... La Parguera, you see, was always part of my life, and even my wife, who cannot even swim, loves La Parguera.

Attachment to place is a common theme in the narratives of caseteros, and it seems to have the role of explaining their presence and arguing in its favor. The story of how this particular casetero acquired his property in 1991 provides a glimpse not only into the motivations of caseteros, but also into the processes that allow for their success in staying there in spite of controversies over their legality:

This house belonged to [a successful business owner also living in Mayagüez], and I tried to rent it. I said...I will give you \$3,000 a month, he said you are crazy. But then again, you know, I was making good money. And he said no, [that it was too much], and no, and no, and then he said he would sell it to me. I gave him \$65,000. When I paid him that amount [in 1991] people called me crazy, '*botarata*,'<sup>5</sup> unbelievable, they said what people paid was more like \$17,000, but in the end I'd say to them, Look, did I borrow money from you? They said look, they will remove these houses, there are risks....

I asked Dr. Leny about these risks. I also asked him if he had a property title or deed. He explained that before its construction, edicts had been published in the local papers allowing people to object—that many casetas had been built in this manner before his. When I insisted with questions about legality and property titles, he said:

The house has no title, but it pays property taxes. [All casetas] pay a tax, a property tax, every year. They have electricity and water, so the government recognizes them, see? They also have phones....Here all the houses discharged [waste] into the water before and the Army Corps [of Engineers] told us that the houses that were connected to a sewer could stay but not the others. So the caseteros paid for two water pumping plants.... It has its legality, within its context.

I asked whether the casetas could be insured, and he answered his was insured for \$70,000. So what, I asked, was the risk people were warning you so much about?

There is a lot of talk here, girl....<sup>6</sup> I am going to tell you something: the reason they want to remove the casetas is [with gestures for emphasis] envy. And I will show you. When I had just arrived here, somebody from the Department of Natural Resources stopped here in a boat and told me, 'We'll get you out.' And I asked him, 'Why? Why do you want to get me out?' And he said, 'Because I [the person from the agency] cannot have this house.'

I bought [this house] with legal money, and I have been happy here. Imagine: I spend four, sometimes five days here a week. Look: I may live in Mayagüez, but I exist in La Parguera, that's the way it is.

This excerpt from Leny's interview illustrates well some of the arguments that caseteros use to justify the wooden structures to themselves, the community, and the general public. The houses are not a new phenomenon but an important part of La Parguera's history; they must be legal because they have been acquired with legal money, pay some taxes, have been granted access to utilities and can be insured; people and agencies who try to get them out do so out of spite because they want a caseta too; and some caseteros are truly attached to La Parguera and their casetas. This casetero, in fact, has been an active participant of community issues and struggles in the past, and is well loved by many residents. He was part of Neighborhood Watch Programs and of community lobbying efforts with the mayor to pass regulations of alcohol sales in the 1980s; he organized health clinics in the 1980s and 1990s. His participation and level of acceptance is not typical of caseteros but probably helps control criticism of casetas in the community. His narrative, in some ways, condenses the claims that tend to be deployed in the legal controversies surrounding the casetas, which seek to make them more legitimate by virtue of their owners' status as "residents" who share place attachment with the community of La Parguera and whose presence benefits the community. Because they state "envy" as the main motivation behind attempts at eviction, the motivations of agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources are also redefined, in this type of argument, as being emotional rather than legal in nature.

#### **Law and image**

A recent opinion piece in the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Nuevo Día* highlights the importance of La Parguera's casetas (Colón Carlo 2005), which are called "casitas" by the author and described as "*bellas y preciosas*" (beautiful and precious.) The use of the word "casita" is interesting. Although very similarly spelled and pronounced, "caseta" and "casita" have somewhat, perhaps very, different meanings. The former is used to describe camping arrangements and as a synonym for terms like "shed" or "tent," evoking ideas and images of leisure, beach, or countryside, or improvised housing. The latter, in contrast, translates as "little house" or "little home," and is often used to refer a particular and very Puerto Rican (or Caribbean, depending on the context) type of architecture. The editorial in question, "Las casitas de La Parguera," did not directly address the legal struggle between Mayagüezanos por la Salud y el Ambiente and the caseteros, but came out in the paper at around the same time. It described La Parguera's attractions, calls casetas "casitas" and refers to them as one such attraction, ending with an appeal to protect and conserve the village...and its casitas. It did not describe the casitas' legal status, the controversies that have surrounded them for decades, or the class status of their owners.

The essay's ambiguity would probably lead a reader unfamiliar with La Parguera to think the said casitas are locals' residences instead of vacation homes. This essay is not the only opinion piece celebrating the casetas this newspaper has published in recent years: Another one, published two years before (Quintero 2003) talks about La Parguera in general terms, characterizing it as the ideal place to get "disconnected" from urban rush, and mentions the casetas:

**Entiendo que La Parguera es un tesoro para los ambientalistas en y fuera de Puerto Rico. Las casitas pintorescas que circundan parte de la laguna, en su mayoría están muy bien mantenidas. Por supuesto que para ver las casitas y conocer la laguna hay que tener, alquilar o conocer a alguien que tenga un bote.<sup>7</sup>**

Although the author mentions the environmental movement and the casetas only once in the essay and in the same paragraph, somehow linking the two, the link is not explored, and neither is the fact that current and past resistance often came precisely from environmentalist organizations and individuals.

This way of depicting casetas makes sense as part of a particular strategy of representation. I have often heard (and a few times have uttered) comments about their charm. A friend's relative, upon seeing them for the first time, expressed her impression as follows: "They are so cute, so typical!" The use of adjectives such as "typical" and some of the charm casetas hold for guests stem from their location and appearance. Casetas are very reminiscent of the kind of building that Puerto Ricans call "casita", or little house, and that writers give names to such as "Puerto Rican vernacular," "criollo housing," or "jíbaro house" (e.g., Jopling 1988). A wooden house with metal roof typical of the Puerto Rican rural working class, a step above from the "bohíos" roofed with straw (Morales Carrión 1983; Aponte-Parés 1990), the "casita" is the subject of paintings by Puerto Rican artists and miniaturized as clay or wood objects for collectors. Little houses adorn the doors of their life-sized counterparts; elementary school students make them with cardboard by students to celebrate Puerto Rican night every year in November; and they are the subject of song and nostalgia, throughout the island and its diaspora.

This kind of construction has become symbolic of Puerto Rican specificity or cultural nationalism in the face of its colonial relation with the United States (Flores 2000). "Casitas" have become a common way to preserve Puerto Rican identity in places like New York (see Figure 4) and Chicago, for example, where they often become "a living installation, a living space of rescued images that reinforce Puerto Rican cultural identity" (Flores 2000). In New York, casitas built in empty, idle lots and carrying nostalgic names such as "Villa Puerto Rico" have been for decades part of an architecture of resistance, a source of pride and memory, an alternative

landscape in the face of gentrification and the consequent erasure from urban landscapes of wealth, and a way to experience attachment to place and national identity (Aponte-Parés 1995).

Casitas in the urban United States are an instance of spatial transformation directed at providing the disenfranchised with cultural meaning and a sense of belonging, and are related to material concerns and need for space as well as to a basic apprehension about social reproduction, a material and symbolic need for "cultural space" (Doxtater 1989). Casetas may be "typical" or even beautiful because they resemble casita architecture and therefore are perceived as representing Puerto Rico in some essential way. However, although La Parguera's casetas appeal to nostalgia and may be aesthetically pleasing and "authentic"



**FIGURE 4.** Casita in New York City. Photograph by Barbara Lynch. Reprinted with permission.

looking, they are not in fact an architectonic strategy of the poor, but a luxury only a leisure class can afford. The Puerto Rican nostalgic, traditional landscape the casetas evoke is not the distant island home present in New York's or Chicago's Puerto Rican discourse—where casitas are often overpowered by huge buildings on all sides—but rather the caseteros' capacity to access, use, even own, a chunk of the island paradise of Puerto Rican national imaginings, a piece of the sea itself.

In the North American cities, where casitas appear as ethnic markers (Sciorra 1996), they have become a way of asserting Puerto Rican identity in the face of poverty and gentrification. But whereas casitas in these cases are a spatial strategy meant to resist the cultural and economic displacement that working class Puerto Ricans endure in New York's new economy (Aponte-Parés 1995; Flores 2000), and may serve as a symbol that helps demarcate ethnic boundaries and thus keep gentrification at bay in Chicago (Flores-González 2001), in La Parguera, the caseteros' use of vernacular architecture facilitates and is part of a pattern of privileged access to the coast and to a landscape of leisure. While casitas like Casita Don Pedro in Chicago may be a “bold statement in the face of gentrification” (Flores-González 2001: 17), casetas in La Parguera seem to represent gentrification rather than resistance to it.

#### **Power and privilege: Who gets the judge out?**

The privileged background of most, if not all, caseteros is an often noted issue in the controversy surrounding the casetas in the local press. Caseteros are broadly considered “invasores de lujo” (deluxe squatters), in contrast with the “squatters by necessity” characteristic of other illegal building contexts (Méndez 1985; Llanes-Santos 2001). As such, they tend to have influential friends. The opinion essays mentioned above emphasized the charm of what they called casitas in La Parguera. Ileana Colón Carlo, the author of the first one, was Puerto Rico's comptroller from 1987 to 1997. The author of the second one, Ana Helvia Quintero, is a widely known and respected educator who has held a number of important positions in the administration of the University of Puerto Rico. Not only are the owners of many (if not most) casetas wealthy enough to take and absorb the financial risk of paying for, owning, and maintaining second homes of dubious legality; through the years they have also received public support from important public figures. Essays such as the one quoted above may help shape public opinion in favor of the casetas. The press has also denounced what may be illegal connections between some caseteros and political figures such as a judge and even the town's mayor (Nieves 2006). In spite of the controversies surrounding their legal status, the support of the well known or the powerful, combined with dexterous legal maneuvering, has been an effective strategy in allowing casetas to stay, and even thrive. Many casetas are not only second/seasonal homes to their owners but also income rental properties that can yield, according to my field interviews, as much as \$1,000 per week.

The practice of building ostensibly illegal structures in ways that can be construed as legal may be as old as casetas themselves, dating back to the 1930s, and almost as old as the village itself, which, according to ten life-history narratives collected in the field, began taking shape as such sometime in the 1920s. In 1938, a potential casetero (a physician from the town of Lajas, the jurisdiction to which La Parguera belongs) asked for permits from the then pertinent agency, the Public Service Commission, and was told to publish some edicts in a local newspaper: If nobody complained,

he had permission to build. Many casetas from that period were built in that manner: edicts published, no complaints, construction work happening at night and very quickly (Brusi 2004).

The same agency that gave building permits in the 1930s, however, took the squatters to court in 1969; the court ruled in favor of the agency, giving the owners of casetas (at that time more than a hundred) sixty days to leave before the remaining structures were demolished by the state. But in 1973, the Commonwealth Supreme Court ruled against this prior ruling, stating that the caseteros would have another opportunity to present their case on the basis that their right to due process had not been fully observed (*San Juan Star* 1973). In 1978, then-governor of Puerto Rico, Carlos Romero Barceló, signed an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers, establishing the norms for La Parguera's development (*San Juan Star* 1973), following the recommendations of yet another agency, the Puerto Rico Planning Board (Junta de Planificación de Puerto Rico 1968).

The agreement stated the intention of declaring La Parguera as a combination of a natural fishing reserve and a public leisure area. In the interest of these two goals, the agreement said that first, the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources would be in charge of carrying out the guidelines and enforcing the rules, and second, that the casetas on the coast, for ecological and access reasons, had to be removed by their owners within the following twelve years (that is, before 1985) or face legal charges. In December 1979, however, the same governor gave the caseteros "use permits," allowing them to stay in La Parguera. These permits were approved, not by the Department of Natural Resources but by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The governor justified his decision saying that "at the same time we are helping to preserve the values and natural resources of La Parguera, we must respect the investment these families have made in the area" (*El Mundo* 1979: 15). A big investment, indeed. One casetero whose family purchased a caseta in the 1970s for the price of approximately \$10,000 told me in 1999 he had been offered \$250,000 for the structure but had declined the

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## THE ONLY CASETEROS THAT HAVE BEEN EVICTED, ACCORDING TO FROILÁN, A FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE FISHERS' ASSOCIATION OF LA PARGUERA, WERE THE POOR ONES.

offer. The realtor selling the caseta mentioned in the introduction at \$350,000 told me she had received an offer for \$295,000. Her client also declined and is currently expecting a better offer.

The state has tended, historically, to relocate poor communities located by the sea, deemed to be "unsafe" or "dirty" (especially in mangrove-populated areas) to areas deemed to be safer, such as parcelas or caseríos<sup>8</sup> (Griffith et al. 1995; Duany 1997). Considerations to the "investment" made by squatters are not the

norm in the state's response to other cases of illegal building (Llanes-Santos 2001; Cotto 1993, 2006; see some current examples in Franco 2007, González 2007, Rivera 2006 and Gaud 2006a). The Puerto Rico Conservation Trust (Fideicomiso de Conservación), for example, has recently recommended the removal of the homes of members of a Yabucoa community who have lived for several decades in the marine-terrestrial zone; their homes, like the casetas, are for the most part located in untitled land (Rivera 2006). No essays have been published by public figures extolling their houses as colorful or picturesque, and no sympathetic discourse makes reference to their "investment," a term that the mayor of Lajas and at least two former governors of Puerto Rico have used in press conferences when talking about the casetas in La Parguera. The only caseteros that have been evicted, according to Froilán, a former president of the Fishers' Association of La Parguera, were the poor ones:

**The first casetas were made around the forties. The resentment against the casetas comes later, with the big interests. Here, lawyers and judges come, clandestinely invade the land, forcefully, and they build a fence, forbidding access to people like us. We are not against casetas, but it is not fair. Fences, is all you see, if you get in they can shoot you. It is the abuse of power, the problem.... Who, of the judges, is going to bring them an eviction order? Judge Pérez Jiménez,<sup>9</sup> who would get him out? But Don Guelo Ramos, the fisherman, the only thing he had was that little house in the water, the DRN brought him an eviction order; Guelo, a decent and good human being, humbly and honestly obeyed the order and destroyed his house, while the others stayed.<sup>10</sup>**

This man was denouncing an eviction double standard in the way the state has chosen to prosecute illegal building in the mangrove shore of La Parguera. Illegal housing near water is particularly prone to evictions and denial of permits, and the closeness of the sea has been used by the government as a reason for such evictions and denials for permits for water and electricity in low income communities in the recent past (Gaud 2006a). Although I could not verify this particular story with press reports or official documents, narratives from other interviews supported the basic plot; at some point in the 1970s, others said, a fisherman named Guelo had been evicted and his caseta destroyed, while cases against wealthy caseteros languished in court.

Discussing the way in which La Parguera's casetas fare better than poor rescates in the recent past, historian Llanes Santos states succinctly: "La corte para unos; la pala mecánica para otros" (The court for some; the digger for others) (Llanes Santos 2001: 72). According to documents of the Puerto Rican Public Service Commission, in 1971 there were more than one hundred illegal casetas. Illegal as they were, however, all had access to water and electricity obtained through the corresponding state agencies (Llanes-Santos 2001). Press reports agree with Leny, the casetero interviewed above, in that state concessions such as these tend to give caseteros "a certain condition of legality" (Guzmán 1993) in the eyes of public opinion and even other government agencies, increasing their likelihood of receiving other permits and concessions. While like Guelo in La Parguera, many *rescatadores de tierras* throughout the island have been forced to abandon their houses, caseteros have access to utilities such as water and electric.

Favorable public opinion notwithstanding, caseteros are far from passive in the defense of their vacation homes: They have an association through which

they hire top-rate legal counsel. In 1993, the Department of Natural Resources (in Spanish, DRN),—with the support of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Boston First Circuit, secured a federal order to evict the illegal structures that were not connected to the sewer, namely the houseboats located on or near the mangrove islands on the other side of the channel. They removed fifty-three structures in total. But the casetas themselves, which the DRN said were the next step, numbered near two hundred by this time, and owners resisted eviction thorough press conferences and sophisticated legal arguments. They were already connected to the sewer, electrical, and water systems; they had volunteered to pay property and municipal taxes; and they argued that their casetas predated the 1968 agreement between the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) and the governor. The ACE expressed their belief

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## “BUENO, AHORA SOY YO EL QUE DICE QUE SE QUEDAN”

in the implicit legality of casetas who had been there for a long time without permits (Guzmán 1993). The difficulties associated with battling these claims in court against owners that had the financial means and the know-how to defend their position further slowed down the DNR plans and prompted its secretary to admit that other agencies could grant permits to the caseteros and that the Commonwealth government, not his agency, should determine who had a right to stay and who didn't.

Against NOAA's claim that the bay, being part of a natural reserve, could harbor no casetas, the secretary argued that the casetas' long standing in the area, their connection to the sewer system, and their payment of property taxes and other characteristics implied an acceptance of their presence from various government agencies and as such, their *de facto* legalization (Guzmán 1993). To complicate matters further, some caseta owners had acquired permits from the Corps of Engineers. The fact that La Parguera in particular and coastal areas and natural reserves in general are sometimes under the watch of multiple government agencies seems to hinder rather than help their monitoring.

The DRN stopped its attempts to evict caseteros after 1993, but environmental groups kept denouncing them in the press. In 1996, then governor Pedro Roselló was invited by caseteros to visit La Parguera, and after taking a tour of the village—in which the president of the Asociación de Caseteros at that time, Miguel Alonso, served as his personal guide—he held a press conference, in which he announced that he was granting the caseteros permission to stay. When reminded by the press of the criticism of environmental groups and of the recent statements by the DRN secretary to the effect that the casetas were polluting the environment and should leave, the governor responded: “Bueno, ahora soy yo el que dice que se quedan” (Well, now it is I who says they stay) (Guzmán 1996). The different elements of their decades-long strategy, consisting of legal expertise, claims to antiquity, community belonging, and environmental and economic benefits, were all present in Alonso's response to the governor's words, quoted here as published by the local press:

**We, as always, have said that we have been rightful owners of these properties for more than 50 years. We have helped La Parguera to become the only site for ecotourism in Puerto Rico, becoming an integral part of this community, with our contribution to the ecology, economy, and the progress that can be seen in this sector as well as in the whole of the Lajas municipality.**

The mention of “ecotourism” is interesting. Casetas are seen by some sectors as problematic from an environmental perspective. They have been historically criticized for dumping human waste in La Parguera’s water, although today most of them are connected to a sewer. The sewer, however, is believed by many residents to be inefficient and to return soiled waters to the sea. Caseteros and their supporters frequently use “ecotourism” as a term in their defense and this use may derive from a view of this and related terms as defined more by the enjoyment of nature than by its preservation. Alonso’s connection between caseteros and “ecotourism” and “ecology” reflects both an attempt to make the structures legitimate from an economic perspective, and a tendency on the part of caseteros to associate the term “ecological” with the enjoyment of nature rather than with its protection, and to define “nature” in terms of the aesthetics associated with viewing it (Entrikin 1991).<sup>11</sup> The DRN responded to these events by reserving the right to inspect individual properties and sue them on environmental grounds (Vargas 1996). Remaining potential environmental problems include the threat to La Parguera’s bioluminescent bay posed by the emission of artificial light (Martínez Mercado 2003). The interesting thing about the environmental argument, however, is that it seems to be deployed in the case of the casetas and not in rescates by the poor near or by the sea. Agencies and individuals targeting the casetas for removal have to appeal to the environment to justify their conclusions about them. The role played by the environment in the cases and arguments against casetas implies that their illegality in itself is not enough.

At least in the collective sense, Roselló’s permission seems to have been the end of any attempts by the state to regulate casetas. The current mayor of Lajas stated to the press in 2002 that the controversy surrounding the casetas had to do with pollution and was “part the past” (*El Nuevo Día* 2002: 54), making any further attempts by the DNR to eliminate them “unnecessary.” More recently, he has said that the casetas contribute to the economy of the town: “Those [caseteros] buy fish here, use the supermarkets, hire maids and people to watch over their houses and their boats” (Nieves 2006), and he is currently sponsoring the implementation of an annual tax of \$1,000 per caseta that will force them to “contribute even more” (Gaud 2006b; Nieves 2006). The idea to charge this tax probably emerged from caseteros themselves, who had been offering to pay it for several years. This measure, critics suggest, could signify what the granting of permits for electricity and water has done in the past: further legitimation of an illegal structure (Gaud 2006b; Nieves 2006).

#### **“A good thing that’s not so good”**

How about the local residents of La Parguera? Do they resent casetas? Most often, when talking to people about this issues, the answer is ambivalent, and the feelings towards casetas, mixed. Casetas, as part of the general development of the village, are often associated with job opportunities and with economic “progress.”<sup>12</sup> A resident of las Parcelas told me that caseteros were a “good thing” and “not so good” at the same time. He explained as follows:

**At some point we cared about the casetas thing. But those people employ people from La Parguera for cleaning, boat care, the caretakers of the casetas are all from here....Progress is good and bad at the same time. Because it is not like before anymore, but yes, it has given life to people in La Parguera.**

Establishing a relationship between casetas and proposing the idea of progress, some lament caseta presence but at the same time acknowledge their perceived benefits. These benefits range from the purported “economic injection” described by the mayor of Lajas (*El Nuevo Día* 2002), through caseteros purchase of goods and services from local sources (Nieves 2006), to the funding of a sewer system that serves not only casetas but also other, poorer houses of the barrio. This sewer addressed environmental and community public opinion matters simultaneously, allowing Fidel Alonso to tell the press in 1986 that he was particularly grateful for the residents’ support, saying that they “are in turn grateful to us for the sewer service, funded by us caseteros at a cost of half a million dollars” and arguing that thanks to the caseteros, pollution levels were down rather than up (Guzmán 1994).

When interviewed, local residents in La Parguera seldom expressed support for the casetas or gratitude for the sewer. They did, however, single out some caseta owners as “good people” and “good to the community.” They talked fondly, for example, about the dentist and long-time casetero described above, who in addition to organizing health clinics and other activities had led initiatives to improve security in La Parguera and donated money to the local Little League. When I talked to the casetero in question, he appealed to the perceived benefits of casetas by proposing a familiar set of solutions to the problem: to tax them (a measure the mayor supports and that critics argue would imply legalizing the structures), and to force their owners to make and keep them “pretty and well maintained, colorful and full of light at night,” exploiting their potential as a tourist attraction and further contributing to the local economy.

The actual and potential beauty of the casetas tends to be a common part of arguments in their favor, as exemplified by the editorials cited above. Casetas are also an important element of the kind of image many developers and business people want La Parguera to project. This image of La Parguera as a “fishing and tourist village” is praised often by those concerned with La Parguera’s development. A land appraiser and homeowner that I interviewed in 1998 suggested that the successful development and the increase of tourism and land values in La Parguera depended on this image, or “look”:

**The best thing for tourism (because development here cannot be for locals, it has to be directed towards tourism) is the “rustic” thing...you know, stuff made out of wood, good food, but fitting the environment, a tourism that follows the image, that takes advantage of the image of fishing village.... Some people do not like the “yolas” (fishing boats), los pinchos, los trailers, but that is part of Parguera’s history, of its image, and as such should be part of its development. A nice thing, a pretty thing for tourists, who after all are here to see a fishing village, not a city. (Brusi 2004: 69)**

Casetas, being made of wood, brightly colored, reminiscent of Puerto Rican traditional rural dwellings (and even more importantly, of modern renditions of such dwellings) fit his idea very well. Further construction of their homes to fit the expectations of a rustic look or fishing atmosphere, caseteros often add a *yola* to their caseta, even as most of them keep a more powerful boat as their main water vehicle (Fig. 5). Gentrification everywhere is closely connected with the activities of

real estate agents who use the characteristics of an area as “hooks” to sell property (Smith 1996): Proximity to nature and the rustic look associated with it are some of the main hooks in La Parguera, suggesting that a rural gentrification processes may be at work (see Ghoose 2004).



**FIGURE 5.** *Caseta, yola and boat. Photograph by Rima Brusi-Gil de Lamadrid. Reprinted with permission.*

Beyond being a luxury “in these times of cement and tar,”<sup>13</sup> the wooden house in fact becomes in La Parguera a marker of luxury and wealth, accessible and desirable to certain class sectors, and further sustaining the transformation of La Parguera into a kind of rural/coastal “postcard” (Brusi 2004) deemed perfect for the gaze of tourists (Williams 1973; Urry 1990). A recent map distributed by the Association of Business People in La Parguera (Figure 6), for example, predictably makes restaurants and hotels prominent in its representation of Parguera. Less predictably, it also portrays casetas on the coast throughout the map, and in fact shrinks, almost erasing the parcelas area of La Parguera. In fact, most structures in La Parguera, including the modern supermarket and shopping center, which are made out of cement, are portrayed in a vernacular, casita style. Represented in this way, the large cement building of the Department of Marine Sciences is reduced to a minor structure, a small bohío. Parcelas, where most long-term, lower-income, full-time residents leave, are erased from the landscape, despite the fact that they contain at least two small guest houses and many rental opportunities. The place that they would occupy in the map is taken by low hills and by the symbol of the association.

The erasure of parcelas from this representation of La Parguera may mirror the material displacement of their owners. Although population in La Parguera is widely perceived as increasing, federal census figures for permanent residents in La Parguera for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are 1,276, 1,113, and 1,141, respectively. This suggests that despite the visible increase in houses, general traffic, and construction, there is a decrease in the core of permanent residents located in las Parcelas, and that La Parguera may exemplify a type of rural gentrification where seasonal residents and visitors displace home-owning, lower income residents (for another example, see Islam 2005). Housing prices, an important element of gentrification processes, are certainly—and consistently—going up, and most streets in the parcelas area feature at least one or two houses that were sold as a second home, perhaps a cheaper, more legal alternative to owning a charming caseta. Another indicator of this type of



But the celebration of the aesthetic and economic contributions of casetas can also be problematic. Casetas in La Parguera are part of a broader phenomenon in Puerto Rico, where seasonal housing seems to be a more legitimate use of the coast than the full-time housing associated with illegal building by poorer sectors. Community and government tolerance of seasonal housing owned by the relatively wealthy on the coast seems to be common on the western and southern coasts—for example, the village of Joyuda, in Cabo Rojo, where what could be a beautiful prospect of the Caribbean along the road is hidden from view, by walls surrounding what are mainly vacation homes but also hotels, condos, restaurants, and rentals; coastal portions of barrios Estela and Barrero in Rincón, where my current research indicates that guest houses, vacation homes, and apartments coexist with poorer communities but occupy the space by the sea, inside the ZMT, almost exclusively and therefore sell for higher prices in the real estate market in spite of their problematic legal status; and newer casetas in Buyé (Cabo Rojo), Papayo (Lajas), and Boquilla (Mayagüez). They can be contrasted with the evictions of coastal, poorer communities of full-time residents such as the ones of La Cócora, Mejiquito, and La Rasqueta, evicted for the most part fifteen years ago<sup>14</sup> (Gonzalez 2007; Franco 2007) and located on the same road than the more luxurious Joyuda vacation homes.

Casetas may appeal at first sight to the senses and the emotions, to the same kind of essential Puerto Ricanness casitas in New York are associated with. After all, both casitas in US cities and casetas in La Parguera make use of the symbolic implications of the casita structure and building plan, of its allusions to Puerto Rican national and cultural identity. Both cases also are tied to the production of leisure spaces, since casitas in the diaspora are often used for parties and celebrations of various sorts and casetas are vacation homes. But crucial differences remain. In New York, the use of vernacular architecture has manifested itself through the construction of casitas

**in the place of decimated apartment complexes. Incorporating gardens & traditional woodframe Caribbean design, these simple structures made from surrounding rubble provide shelter for the homeless & space for social clubs, block associations, cultural centers, community organizations, etc., allowing marginalized Puerto Ricans to reclaim the urban landscape & reshape it in their own image & with their own goals. (Sciorra 1996: 98)**

While in the case of New York's and Chicago's casitas, access to leisure and symbolism are based on the understanding of the casita as a collective effort (Aponte-Parés 1995; López 2002; Sciorra 1996), La Parguera's casetas are private, individually owned leisure spaces. Their public aspect is not based on their being available for collective use but rather on their being the object of a collective gaze. Casitas are defined as spaces to be used by members of a given community. The intent of those who build and use them in urban settings in the United States may be described as using the casita architecture to create an instance of "singularization" (Kopytoff 1986), the movement of an object from the realm of the market into the realm of culture. In contrast, casetas use the cultural meanings implied in their architecture to perform the opposite move, turning an object legally outside the sphere of the market (in the Zona Marítimo Terrestre) into a commodity suitable for exchange. Casetas are bought and sold at relatively high prices, while casitas are not for sale.

Although they are an instance of illegal building, the casetas phenomenon is very different from other forms of illegal building such as casitas and rescates, and at some level constitute an affront to the latter's ideological basis of equality, human rights,

transformation of mainstream market and real estate values, and social justice. Casetas are private property understood to have an aesthetic role to play as part of a landscape to be gazed at. As such, the kind of progress they represent is at least questionable, especially in light of their implications for social justice. Although La Parguera has the most evident and the largest concentration of casetas in Puerto Rico, such structures owned as second homes in coastal areas are commonplace and probably increasing, and all tend to use the casita architecture (see López 1970 for an example). It has been said that the Puerto Rican coast is largely being shaped by the struggle between work and leisure (Griffith and Valdés-Pizzini 2002). Advocating for the permanency of casetas in La Parguera, justified in the name of their material contribution to the economy and visual contribution to the village's look and thus to tourism, is similar to other arguments in favor of the coastal development (see, for example, the current struggle against the Costa Serena megacomplex, in Colón Dávila 2006). Such development threatens to displace people—and other species—from the Puerto Rican eastern coast. Casetas may look like casitas, but while casitas in urban spaces are predicated on providing access, on turning formerly private property into public space, casetas block access, turning what should be public space into private property; they are for the most part for seasonal use and upper-class ownership; they have managed to stay on the coast with the support of powerful people; and their context is one in which poorer owners, such as Guelo, and poorer home owners, such as the ones in the parcelas, are materially or symbolically erased from the landscape. Casetas can thus be seen as part of a broader phenomenon of rural/coastal gentrification in Puerto Rico, which gives privileged access to the sea—not to those who live from it but to those who play in it. This access is based on class-specific legal maneuvering and public relations, and lacks the ideological and political legitimacy that other forms of illegal building, such as rescates, may claim.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rescate settlements in Puerto Rico and casitas in New York City have both been the subject of quality academic work. For rescates in Puerto Rico, please refer to the works by Cotto (2006), Llanes-Santos (2000), and the theses by Abreu Jiménez (1990) and Bonilla (1986). The literature on casitas is rich and includes articles published in this journal.

A partial list: Aponte-Parés (1995), Flores (2000), Flores-González (2001) and Sciorra (1996).

<sup>2</sup> The parcelas program, part of the Puerto Rico Ley de Tierras and in the context of agrarian reform in Puerto Rico and New Deal Policies in the United States (see Edel 1962; see also Tugwell 1954), distributed lots between 800 and 2000 square meters in size in rural communities throughout the island. In fact, parcelas in La Parguera were expanded in the late 1980s as the result of a land rescue carried out by some of the now adult children of the original parcela recipients. See Brusi (2004); for a detailed history of Puerto Rican rescates since 1968, see Cotto (2006) and Llanes-Santos (2001).

<sup>3</sup> “los de clase alta,” “los ricos,” and “los profesionales” were expressions that La Parguera residents used, in the course of my dissertation research, to describe caseta owners and to articulate descriptions of class differences. See Brusi (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>5</sup> “Botarata”: somebody who spends money carelessly.

6 “*Aquí hay mucha habladuría, nena.*”

7 “I understand that La Parguera is a treasure for environmentalists in Puerto Rico and abroad. Most of the picturesque casitas that surround part of the lagoon are very well maintained. Of course, to see the casitas and get to know the lagoon one has to own, rent or know somebody that owns a boat.”

8 This was especially true of large settlements in urban or semiurban areas, such as the famous slums of El Fanguito and Tokyo. New deal policies of the 1940s and later, Operation Bootstrap policies for social change in Puerto Rico with the aim of turning the island into a full blown industrial economy turned Puerto Rico into a well-known laboratory, a social and economic (sometimes, infamously so, medical) experiment. For early analysis of this phenomenon as it applies to the removal of (mainly slum) residents from mangrove areas, see Lewis (1955); for overviews of housing in Puerto Rico through history, see for example Duany (1997), Griffith (1995) and Jopling (1996); for pictures and other visuals, see for example <http://newdeal.feri.org/pr/littlemud>. Overviews of Operation Bootstrap and the socioeconomic policies of the Puerto Rican state after 1940 (including housing policies designed to remove the poor from mangrove areas and into new forms of housing such as parcelas and caseríos) are many, but include Dietz (1986), Pantojas (1979), and Rivera (1985).

9 Federal judge and caseta owner.

10 All quotes translated by the author from the original Spanish unless otherwise noted.

11 Casetas may also be considered part of “ecotourism” if they are implicitly compared with other—worse—potential uses of the shore.

12 The word “progress” in residents’ narratives seemed to have a role similar to what terms such as “modernization,” “renewal,” and “Renaissance” have had—as ways to justify or even celebrate gentrification. See Smith (1996).

13 Wooden houses, casitas, are celebrated not only because they represent Puerto Rican identity but also because they allow us to resist a kind of modernity symbolized, in turn, by other materials. A Puerto Rican folk song from the seventies says the wooden house is a “lujo en estos tiempos de cemento y de brea.”

14 Today approximately twenty-five families still resist their eviction. See Franco (2007).

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