



CAYEY, PUERTO RICO

# The Gardens of Jájome

*Preserving a Puerto Rican Treasure*



Built during the interwar era (1917-1939), many country homesteads in Cayey's barrio of Jájome exemplify a local Puerto Rican landscape design tradition previously thought to be extinct. These properties link architectural typology with topography, and their gardens are integrated into the terrain as strategic features rather than as decoration. In fact, the gardens of Jájome provide a paradigm for future interventions on similar hillsides. However, few people are aware of this treasure, mostly due to the rural isolation of this area. Lack of professional documentation of the gardens - as well as the potential for mining in this zone - jeopardize this 'invisible' patrimony, risking not only the landscapes themselves but also the collective civic and societal heritage of Cayey and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

## HISTORY

Return to the countryside as an ideal place to establish a dwelling has been historically related to the expansion of cities. Examples such as the villeggiatura during the Renaissance period and the English estates of the 18th and 19th centuries come to mind. In Puerto Rico, several 20th century structures and their adjoining gardens afford us an opportunity to continue the age-old debate about the benefits of urban versus rural life.

Since 1917, some country homesteads in Cayey's barrio Jájome have personified this idealized notion of polis versus countryside. Here, these opposites coincide at Road #15, between the towns of Guayama and Cayey. What could be



interpreted as the dissolution of boundaries in fact exemplifies a dialogue between the rural landscape and the architecture of the metropolis.

Even though the Jájome homes and gardens maintain a strong connection, dwelling and nature still retain their separate identities. Theorists such as Raymond Williams established that two ideas were associated with each place: the country side was related to values of a peaceful and simple lifestyle, while those associated to the city had to do with progress, communication, knowledge. Puerto Rico's Cayey sector demonstrates this vision in the dwelling typology prevalent in this remote sector. The combination of gardens and homesteads represents an idealization of the experiences attached to each one of these spaces: country and city simultaneously.

Built between 1917 and 1939, these country estates thus reflect this country/city paradigm, elegant homes rooted to their context through stepped gardens and terraced schemes. These structures proliferated during the 1930s, laid out on agricultura – and therefore extensive – pieces of land. Throughout the years, most lots became residential but retained their large acreage.

In Puerto Rico, diverse elements acted as catalysts in the construction landscaped homes along the old Road #4 (today #15) from Cayey to Guayama. Events such as epidemics, the displacement of economic production and socio-cultural discourses drove and defined this area to be a place of leisure. By the end of the 19th century Guayama was more directly impacted by outside influences, given its coastal condition and economy. On one hand, vacationing on the hillsides of Puerto Rico became a trend partly due to the region's moderate temperatures. On the other, since 1907 the Islands Governor's spent their free time in Jámome, thus characterizing the area as privileged. The epoch's music and literature underscored appreciation towards the countryside. This interest in the vernacular would additionally translate into the region's architecture and landscape architecture.

Cayey's gardens are important at several levels. First, they exemplify a local gardening tradition that (up to this point) was believed to be extinct. Second, by linking an architectural typology with topographical conditions, the gardens of Jájome provide a paradigm for future interventions on the hillsides.

A number of techniques were used to handle the steep grade changes in Jájome, including stairs, ramps, walkways and retaining walls. This practice related directly to design typology, circulation patterns and tectonics. A combination of 'V'-shaped terraces, retaining walls and *giardinis* (gardens located on the opposite side of the road in front of the dwelling) also typically characterized the structure of these gardens. Stepped terraces along with the use of retaining walls related the home's formal composition with the natural surroundings. Il *giardino* represented the transition between the built environment and the 'wilderness', as a tool for establishing 'territory'. This strategy afforded the possibility of defining and maintaining control of the habitable space surrounding the home.

Conceptually, the garden and its points of access anchored the house to the topography, although the garden's typically large scale and character also suggested that it could be seen as an autonomous entity. Together, however, the house and the garden served as a spatial framework within the natural environment, containing the social and public activities that ultimately were centered inside the dwelling.

The use of *der garten* in the Cayey area was predicated upon the integration of the landscape as a strategic feature rather than as decoration. Nor is the garden relegated to serving as residual space, as is the case with much contemporary housing in Puerto Rico and abroad. In this sense, the gardens of Cayey offer a model with major implications for today's urban design. Jájome's landscape tradition can talk to us about how design – regardless of scale – can respond to topography. It also carries the whisper of a city that turned invisible and was buried between the furrows of nature, as these priceless estates landscapes have lain, quietly, throughout the years.



## THE THREAT

There are several potential threats to the permanence of these spaces, given that the Jájome garden system is located in the center of Puerto Ricans' hillsides. Some of these factors stand out:

- The fact that the majority of the general population – from Cayey, Guayama and Island-wide – remains unacquainted about the existence of these structures;
- The lack of documentation of the gardens – formally, constructively and its vegetative material – hinders the investigative process for the area; and
- The legacy of previous attempts to exploit the mineral resources of this zone.

Acting in conjunction, these factors not only jeopardize this 'invisible' patrimony but threaten the collective memory of the civil society of these towns and of Puerto Rico itself.

## HOW TO HELP

Preservation of the gardens of Jájome can be attained through various strategies. A partnership, in the form of a new non-profit organization, will be created between the Jájome community members, representatives from the Polytechnic University, and the municipality of Cayey. A consortium between the Polytechnic University and community representatives should be established in order to facilitate studying these gardens. A triangular relationship between these entities could promote ways and activities to value and promote landscape preservation, landscape design, and gardening in Puerto Rico. Preservation of this garden system is proposed and supported by the School of Architecture at the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, in conjunction with a Master Degree Program in Landscape Architecture to open next fall, as well as the institution's Center for Urban Studies. As these landscapes remain virtually unknown, it is difficult to identify individuals that will oppose the preservation of the gardens of Cayey, or other issues that may arise. Those who wish to be of assistance in the documentation and preservation of these landscapes may offer comparable precedents as well as information about pertinent preservation efforts.

### Site Address

Various locations in Cayey's barrio Jájome.

### Contact

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