LA CASA ALEGRÍA: AN EXCEPTIONAL EXAMPLE OF THE SAN JUAN DWELLING

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A house is more—much more—than a few walls holding up a roof.
Its architectural typology shelters a home that allows a group of human beings to carry out, in their most intimate of lives, their primary role as members of the family, the most endearing and foundational social unit.

In the historic district of Old San Juan, out of a total of 866 lots and 839 buildings, 758 have at one time served as homes for multiple generations of the free and enslaved, the wealthy and the poor, the young and the old, men and women.

The admired domestic façade of San Juan is a wall—at times adorned with elegant portals, ancient architectural orders, extroverted balconies that fly toward the street, or timid and highly private sills—that acts as a boundary between the sacred (the interior of the home) and the profane (the exterior).
In silence, all of them convey the personal and social aspirations of generations of families, telling us hidden stories of our capital city. Each possesses a peculiar charm; each invites us to dream about our collective past; each seeks to represent the essence of the San Juan family and its development across centuries.

Among this sea of extraordinary residences, *Casa Alegría* rises on the crest of the wave as one of the most exceptional architectural examples that allow us to travel back to our origins as a people. Possibly built in the 18th century, its walls have hosted countless activities as well as an innumerable—and now forgotten—number of families. For more than half a century, it also served as the daily setting for the Alegría family. Its last resident was **Dr. Ricardo E. Alegría**, who lived there until his death.

This unique and spectacular residence belongs to the **San Juan Baroque**, the second domestic architectural period in Old San Juan. It took shape mainly during the 18th century when islanders spread their creative wings and transformed the millenary domestic Mediterranean patterns to reflect a budding Puerto Rican architectural personality.

The Alegría house belongs to **Type B**, the second group developed during this fertile period. It is characterized by a centralized entrance hall (*zaguán*) that serves as both foyer and entryway, also connecting to the patio gallery and the grand staircase that leads to the second floor and its ample, stately rooms.

We are fortunate to have detailed descriptions of 18th-century San Juan by **Fray Iñigo Abbad y Lasierra**, a distinguished visitor of the time.
According to him, “the construction of homes is as varied as the castes and classes of their inhabitants.” His words show that social classifications were closely tied to skin color. He noted that it was rare for a house to have more than one story, which gives the Alegría home exceptional value, directly pointing to the social and economic power of its original residents.

Although homes of the time could cost up to 10,000 pesos, they were generally not comfortable. Abbad believed the simplicity of domestic architecture in San Juan was due to climate, earthquakes, and the high cost of materials and labor.

The Alegría house bears witness to the notable contrast in residences between the wealthy and others.
While homes of "mulattos and people of color" were built of “planks and beams,” those of “Blacks and the poor” were described by Abbad as “cages” due to their fragile construction. These were also called *bohíos*, like the native dwellings, as they had only one interior space. These homes, located on the outskirts of the city yet within the walled area, were referred to as *arrabales* (slums).

Abbad didn’t realize that the world—both in Spain and San Juan—was transforming before his eyes. The powerful social and cultural currents of the **Enlightenment** affected all aspects of daily life, including gender roles and family structure.
These changes were reflected in domestic architecture. As domestic life gained importance, the house came to be seen as a space of learning for families, both among the elite and the artisan class. Conceived as the first learning center, home design gained relevance as a symbol of intelligibility and decorum.

By the 18th century, the façade had become an urban mise-en-scène, a projection of the family's distinction. The street in front of the house began to influence its organization, establishing a physical embrace between the two.
Many façades thus became architectural statements of the family's elegance and status, moving away from the informal and irregular styles of the Conquest era.

The **Alegría House façade** emphasizes the entry portal, revealing Italian Baroque influence as well as two architectural trends: the **Plateresque style** and the **severe Herrerian style**.
Its paired Ionic pilasters play with multiple planes, supporting an architrave and crowned by a “floating lintel.” This creates a layered visual effect. The contrast is evident between the formal main entrance on **San José Street** and the more irregular façade facing **Calle del Sol**. This reflects architectural tensions after the abandonment of Conquest-era norms, which lacked the compositional elegance needed to honor a family's lineage.

New decorative treatments also emerged:

- **Retallos** (molded borders) frame the openings of the house, imitating masonry frames.
- **Floating lintels**, used for aesthetic purposes, crown windows and doors. Though first seen in **17th-century Havana**, they became popular in 18th-century San Juan.

Despite criticism from institutions like Spain's **Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando**, which dismissed Baroque and Plateresque elements as superficial, local architects embraced them. The Alegría façade juxtaposes these "transgressive" lintels with traditional academic elements like the **Ionic order**, revealing a centuries-old stylistic struggle.

The **balcony** reached full decorative and functional maturity during this period.
According to Cuban theorist **Joaquín E. Weiss**, the Caribbean birthed the **façade balcony** known in Spain today. These new balconies coincided with:

- The shift from **tapiería** (earthen walls) to **lime-and-stone**, **concerted**, and **ordinary masonry**;
- A new lifestyle where **leisure and urban social life** became important, especially by the late 18th century.

Though still male-dominated spaces, balconies became family gathering spots at dusk. In the 20th century, they were described as places where "in the evenings, the family sits and chatters in the light, pleasant chit-chat of southern climes."
They were also decorated for royal births or deaths, reflecting civic duties.

During the Baroque period, **Islamic influence** in Spanish domestic architecture waned. The new Spanish-Roman (or "Christian") style aligned the zaguán and patio, reflecting a revived interest in **Roman spatial patterns**—like the *domus* and *insula*.
While **Type A** homes followed a sequence of public-to-private rooms, **Type B** homes like Alegría's featured the zaguán as the central axis.

The splendid **Alegría zaguán** transitions into an imposing gallery opening onto a central courtyard. There, a magnificent staircase begins—its light and dark gray **Genoese marble steps**, bordered with wood, contrast beautifully with blue-and-white **Delft tiles** on the risers. Dr. Alegría once confirmed this staircase was unique in the district, perhaps rivaled only by the one at the **Marqués de la Esperanza's** mansion on **Tetúan Street**.

Ascending the staircase is like traveling back to a time when architecture was a feast for the senses. A large skylight pours sunlight down; a **Tuscan column** frames the landing, and **gray-painted wooden beams** edged in **bright Havana blue** polychromy remain untouched by time.

Both house types (A and B) have patios aligned to the property's edge and a sequential series of rooms (*enfilade*) known locally as the "**hammer**" wing. This was where bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms (if available) were located. The Alegría kitchen still houses its **long hearth and hood**, flanked by **naïve painted ceramic tiles**. These tiles narrate the domestic rituals of family food preparation.

Dr. Alegría stated that only one other house in the district had such decoration: the **old San Ildefonso seminary kitchen**.
In homes like this, many rooms opened directly onto the patio, often through wide galleries. Even before 19th-century urban density, many people lived in San Juan homes: extended families and domestic servants. Galleries accommodated this crowd and all their activities.

The **Countess of Merlin** described a mid-19th-century Havana home:

"My uncle's house is very large, surrounded by tall galleries closed with shutters to block the sun. We eat in one of these galleries because dining rooms inside the house are forbidden due to the heat."

18th-century San Juan homes like Alegría's were icons of the **Ancien Régime**.
Their elegance—the grand portals, dramatic balconies, monumental zaguáns, adorned staircases, and large salons—spoke of a society where architecture conveyed family lineage and respectability. Unknowingly, they were a challenge to the **social upheavals** that would soon shatter old perceptions of life.

By the 19th century, Spain was forced to embrace **modernity**. With the **1812 Constitution** ("La Pepa"), the colonial world changed irrevocably. The Alegría house, as a leading example of this emerging architectural breed, stood at the threshold of that transformation.

This exceptional architectural treasure holds great historical, social, cultural, and architectural relevance. Adding to its significance is the fact that, until recently, it was the home of one of Puerto Rico's most illustrious figures—**Dr. Ricardo Alegría**—who dreamed and worked under the very beams and walls that define one of our town's most important architectural landmarks.

To see it is to gaze into the mirror of our history; to admire it is to honor the legacy of our people.