The Alegría House: An Eloquent Historical Space in Our History

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On Thursday, November 17, 2011, an exhibition of great artistic, historical, urban, and architectural value will open, focused on the city of San Juan Bautista of Puerto Rico. The artist who has given voice to this significant photographic collection is the photographer Rosendo (Chendo) Pérez, and he has titled the exhibition *Ricardo Alegría: An Intimate Gaze*. His work centers on the San Juan home that housed the Puerto Rican intellectual and national figure Ricardo Alegría. The Alegría House, also known as "The House of Tiles," was one of the first restoration projects undertaken by the man to whom this exhibition is dedicated.

This stately, even palatial residence, which he shared with his family, dates —according to research collected by its owner— to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As Dr. Arleen Pabón Charneco accurately states in her book *Puerto Rican Heritage Architecture and Its Styles*, the house reveals clear tendencies toward Italian Baroque. In my opinion, this is not surprising, given that during the final decades of those centuries an Italian regiment was stationed on the island as part of the Spanish army. It is well known that many of those soldiers, in addition to helping defeat the English during the attack led by Sir Ralph Abercromby in 1797, remained on the island as residents.

Likewise, the home evokes a return to a time of restricted circles influenced by Enlightenment thinking. What the photographer's images reveal is how historical spaces can be updated while compressing so many memories within them. The magic of colorblind vision —to some extent— becomes the *liaison* connecting present and past. This is precisely where the art of photography lies: in knowing how to capture an intangible whole in a single glance.

These buildings, which arose in the capital of Puerto Rico, were obviously more sumptuous than those of previous centuries. They demonstrated an economic prosperity sparked first by the initial reforms of Governor Don Felipe Ramírez de Estenós in the mid-18th century, and later by the modernization of military fortifications prompted by the report of Field Marshal Don Alejandro O'Reilly. The construction of these fortifications brought significant funds to the islet. At that time, enslaved people and laborers —many from Mexican prisons— were brought in to carry out these important works.

All of this fostered an expansion of the civilian population within the walled city. As such, this architecture reflects the existence of social stratification and, more significantly, the pursuit of certain refinements in domestic living. For example, the camera captures the **Delft tiles** in exquisite detail —the variations of blues translating into grays that are perceived almost as in the human retina, where sharpness and blur merge to create an integrated image. The white and gray

Genoese marble floors seem to dissolve into light, probably the element that most highlights the play of light entering from all angles.

For instance, some photos taken nearly from floor level in the house's main room highlight the library in the background and seem to delve intimately into the objects resting there. At the same time, they bear witness to the collection held on the walls and the items upon the tables. Truly, this is a documentary compendium shaped by an artistic spark.

It is important to highlight the architectural elements in relation to the internal environment. One could say that the artist evokes a charming nostalgia, influenced by the atmosphere of the surrounding streets. The side of the house faces north, while the front faces east —and that simple orientation creates a contrast between the different environments of each street. The first street bears a more aristocratic stamp, as it seems to fade into the distance, while Calle San José exhibits a busier and more small-town character.

The contrast is also evident in the exterior photos of the house, where balconies and ledges with aspirations of grandeur extend outward over floating platforms. There, parallel lines appear at different distances and rhythms, showing the optical balance of each architectural feature —a technique designed to maintain the viewer's interest. Chendo has deftly captured the interplay of vertical and horizontal elements, both external and internal —as in the case of the narrow slit of light from the side hallway door, where the scarce light seems to dissolve into space.

Other images reveal depth, capturing the strength of a vision where lintels and arches coexist through admirable technical solutions. This gives greater power to the sensation of infinity —in the background, an oil painting adds further intensity to this gaze, accelerated by the illusion of inertia. The perspective created by the painting at the end of the space adds strength to the visual momentum.

It is worth noting that the lighting in each piece does not strike the eye abruptly. Darkness and flickers of light dance around one another, while the areas of brightness are influenced by the surrounding intense tones. Gradations are difficult to capture —one must be attentive to the precise moment when atmospheric shifts, provoked by the sun, occur.

Within this space also coexist the intellectual passions of its owners: the artistic sensibilities of Doña Mela Pons de Alegría and the theoretical convictions of Don Ricardo. The historical, the aesthetic, the archaeological, and the anthropological all come into harmony throughout the home's rooms, halls, and corridors —each drawing our attention. Indeed, the photographer was able to capture the tropical adaptations implemented by the architects to make the home livable in this climate.

It is important to note that a city is the sum of the eras during which it has been populated. San Juan is no exception. The earliest buildings possess a stoic elegance free from ostentation —one that does not sharply contrast with the subtle expressions of existing Baroque, or with the Hispanic-influenced balconies composed of noble native woods like *ausubo*, chosen for their durability. Nor do they clash with the iron balustrades bearing French influence, or with the touches of *Art Nouveau* and *Art Deco* that can also be found in the area. It would be worthwhile, when walking through Old San Juan, to observe these stylistic layers and the superimposition of architectural styles evident in many of its buildings.

We must also remember that, as a city built within a military fortress, San Juan could not accommodate buildings over three stories tall. Nor should we forget that the city adhered to the architectural standards required by Spanish laws and academies. Given that its urban condition developed within a military enclave, most architects or engineers who worked here were part of the Spanish army and were bound to follow strict construction regulations. Perhaps because of this unique situation, San Juan is one of the best-preserved examples of architectural purity within the boundaries of what was once the Spanish Empire.

Finally, I must highlight the portraits taken of Ricardo Alegría, in which the photographer managed to capture the subject's psychological depth. One photo in particular evokes the artistic sensibilities of Renaissance humanists —with the book as its central symbol— while another shows him beside his loyal dog, revealing the sensitivity of a man who transcended his time.

It is important to note that, in a conversation with Dr. Ricardo Alegría, he affirmed that by 1719 a primary structure already existed, which over time grew and adapted to emerging needs. However, its current form matches the description above.