

## **Paseo Caribe and Reglamento 23**

By : RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON

Volume: 35 | No: 32

Page : 28-29

Issued : 08/16/2007

The controversy among environmentalists, conservationists and developers over the site next to Fort San Gerónimo has dominated the media during the past week. I have no desire to get into this controversy, but I cannot help but wonder as to how different things would have been had the administrations that succeeded my own executed the master plan contained in Reglamento 23.

Reglamento 23 was the end product of an interagency task force headed by the Office of Urban Affairs, which I had set up in Fortaleza during my third term in office. The other participating agencies were Pridco and, of course, the Planning Board. The planning exercise began in 1990. It eventually involved Hector Arce and the prestigious Boston architectural firm of Koetter & Kim, outside firms that won a request for proposals for design put out by Pridco, the then owner of the Caribe Hilton and of the properties we had acquired from the Coast Guard. This work was well along when I announced my decision not to run on Jan. 2, 1992 and one of my objectives that year became to finish the project. We finally did in late December before I left office.

Reglamento 23 is a Master Plan for Land Use and Regulations for Special Zoning for the Entrance to the Islet of San Juan. The policy behind it was to transform the then and still existing disjointed and multilayered entrance to the islet occupied by roads of fast-moving traffic into an entrance with a wide elliptical public space surrounded by trees with traffic flowing in the periphery as it does in the intersections of the great boulevards in Europe or in the U.S. It intended to recover the adjoining maritime areas for public use; it was to be a landmark that would guide the redevelopment of the area for residential, commercial and office uses.

The stated objectives of the Plan were as follows:

- “To improve the quality of the public space, reaffirming its importance as the generator of urban development, the seat of civics and scenario of public life in the city.
- “To create an identifiable public space of entrance with high symbolic character that would integrate to the existent public spaces (Luis Muñoz Rivera Park and Escambrón).
- “To recover the ocean fronts of the Condado Lagoon and San Antonio Channel through the creation of a new entrance (for vehicles and pedestrians) to the Caribe Hilton Hotel and to San Geronimo Castle and to restructure the plots in front of the channel as a vehicle to promote the future development of the front of the port in that sector.

- "To reorganize the north side of intersection No. 5 to establish a road space with urban characteristics that would permit the movement of vehicles and pedestrians throughout the area and incorporate collective transport.
- "To establish a residential and hotel development of high density, of an urban character and with compatible commercial uses in the ground floor.
- "To propitiate a development that would bring together the interests of the public and private sectors, that would increase the area of construction and the value of the property as a means to facilitate the construction of the improvements to public infrastructure."

Reglamento 23 has not been repealed but the project to transform the disjointed Third World road space that serves as the entrance to the islet of San Juan was never carried out. Had this been done as the master plan required, this area presently hostile to pedestrians would have been converted into a majestic green space with an oval park and adjoining streets with shady trees, terraced gardens connecting to maritime boardwalks all creating a special web that would have housed public amenities integrated to the surrounding areas of Club Náutico, Caribe Hilton, Muñoz Rivera Park, Escambrón, the San Antonio Channel and the Condado Lagoon.

Part of this new urban web was a new access to the Caribe Hilton from the back and to Fort San Geronimo. This access would run from the grand entrance to the islet parallel to the northern part of the Condado Lagoon leading up to what is now the back of the Caribe Hilton, which would then become the hotel entrance. This same route, for vehicles and pedestrians, would provide the entrance to the fort. Pedestrians would be provided with an oceanfront promenade leading up to the fort.

The master plan covered an area of 25.5 *cuerdas*, most which had not been built at the time, which belonged to the Commonwealth government. This area was subdivided into five parcels integrated to the grid of streets and ample sidewalks. It included the northern part of the present intersection—north of the San Antonio and Esteves bridges—the old Coast Guard lot, with the parking building of the Caribe Hilton, the land between Ponce de León and Fernández Juncos avenues up to street No. 5 and the adjacent parcel of land north of Club Náutico.

The detailed regulations cover all land subdivisions, easements, points of access, volumes, urban walls, uses, parking, access for vehicles, architectural elements and treatment of public spaces. The heights of buildings were limited according to the location of the parcels where the buildings would be situated. They could range from four floors up to one space where 20 floors would be permitted.

The master plan regulated all land use within that area, all subdivisions or segregations, all construction, all external graphic publicity, all public infrastructure projects in the area. In other words, it was a comprehensive master plan, which took more than two years to develop by highly competent

professionals intended to optimize the use of the resource for the enjoyment of the public in general and the residents in particular.

Koetter & Kim featured the project in a book on its major designs published by Rizzoli in 1997. These designs covered their work in Boston, London, Edinburgh, Mallorca, Saigon and San Juan. Here are some of their observations:

“The Entrada as it exists is an extremely complex situation: traffic snarls, confused access, potentially important lands spoiled by traffic, dangerous conditions for pedestrians. And yet, in essence, this is quite a simple location. This is the place where the island of the Old City meets the newer precincts of San Juan. One crosses the lagoon to the island via low bridges and, at this point, one is introduced to the entire island of the Old City with all the historic reality and allure of Old San Juan. But it’s a mess; confusion, roads going in all directions, flyovers, exit ramps, noise—every detail ruining this place for any reasonable use and for any recognition of its symbolic importance: the place where one’s foot first falls on the island of the Old City.

“What to do? We began in a literal way by analyzing the traffic situation. We found that not all traffic crossing this place was moving to or from the Old City, but was coming to this place across one bridge then immediately leaving via another bridge. Somehow, by circumstance, this place had become a major (and unnecessary) traffic interchange for the whole city. This traffic could be removed and remaining traffic could be controlled by coordinated signalization at grade. Pedestrians could now survive and all the ramps and flyovers could be removed; this place could become a useful (and used) part of the city once again. Our traffic engineer, Warren Travers, conceived of a beautiful combination of roadways, pedestrian ways and intense landscaping, all on grade—all on the floor of the city.

“Now, we could imagine a real place of arrival, a genuinely public space that people could occupy and could drive through, walk through, bicycle through, pull boats up to, swim to, and more. This intense combination of various kinds of movement (among other things, San Juan is also a car culture) and many activities is somehow built into the Puerto Rican consciousness.

“At the same time, this place needed some kind of definition, some kind of containment of legibility. We first proposed to contain and mark the site’s irregular perimeter with new building sites—housing, commerce, public agencies, hotels—to bring both definition and local activity to this place...We came to understand the importance, in a situation such as this, of making clear and simple distinctions with respect to the constitution of public space and that such space, in turn, could be supported in many ways by private development as long as basic relationships were clear. We probably would not have come to these realizations as directly and quickly if we had not used this process of testing multiple design options. This seems especially useful in complex urban situations.”

This is an eloquent recount of the professional competence and purpose that shaped the master plan and Reglamento 23.

The master plan and Reglamento 23 were left in place and had the force of law. What happened here? This is a question that should be answered for the people of Puerto Rico. What aspects of this plan can still be salvaged? This is another question, just as important.

