



# PUERTO RICO

# Toro y Ferrer architects

TEN YEARS  
OF REASONABLE  
ARCHITECTURE  
IN PUERTO RICO \*

■ JUAN MARQUÉS MERA

**In 1945 architects Osvaldo Toro and Miguel Ferrer set up their practice in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where, up to 1984, they carried out more than 430 projects.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the number of projects realized and to their quality, their work is an essential reference for modern architecture in Puerto Rico.<sup>2</sup>**

DURING ITS FIRST TEN YEARS, between 1945 and 1955, the firm realized works that inspired, supported and particularly well represented a remarkable moment of the country's architecture. With sensitivity, common sense and restraint, the Toro y Ferrer practice accomplished a high-quality architecture, specific to the situation the country was experiencing at the time, namely its emergence on the scene of modernity and progress.

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican architecture was characterized by the adoption of an eclecticism heavily leaning on the Spanish 'revival.' Puerto Rico copied trends born in Europe, usually with a certain delay. Moreover, the US

home office favored the California mission style whose influence was clear in most of the public buildings realized in Puerto Rico. This new official style replaced the neoclassicism favored by Spain during the colonial period.

The Hispanophile revival developed during the 1930s and 1940s, with a romantic trend that came from Hollywood.

The works of Antonin Nechodema (1877–1928) also represented another important style. The Czech

architect, trained in the United States at the turn of the century, designed many works whose stylistic debt towards Frank Lloyd Wright is obvious.

SEVERAL EVENTS that occurred during the 1940s were propitious to the appearance of a 'new spirit' in Puerto Rico. On the one hand, the Allied victory at the end of World War II and thereafter the US's economic and cultural prosperity that characterized the second half of the century. Puerto Rico's particular link with the major powers allowed the island to take part in this adventure. On the other hand, Puerto Rico also underwent a period of socio-economic reforms and its relationship with the US progressed. Between 1941 and 1945, the last North American governor, Rexford Tugwell, directed the country with a progressive vision that facilitated huge social changes. Simultaneously the Democratic Popular party established its political hegemony and governed practically free of opposition until 1968. Luis Muñoz Marín, the legislature's charismatic leader, who wished to reform and improve the country, became in 1948 the first governor elected by Puerto Ricans. Upheld by the people's enthusiasm, he stayed in office until 1964. In 1952, Puerto Rico's *Estado Libre Asociado* constitution was ratified and the country lived the illusion of autonomy.

THE CARIBE HILTON HOTEL, inaugurated in December 1949, is Toro y Ferrer's most important work, for their first ten years of professional activity. It also gave the direction for a new expression of the country's architecture,



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Fig. 1. **Toro y Ferrer.**  
*Caribe Hilton Hotel, landscape*

\* The investigation that served as the basis of this paper was carried out thanks to a sabbatical leave granted by the University of Puerto Rico.



Fig. 2. **Toro y Ferrer**, *Caribe Hilton Hotel*, terraces and balconies

and influenced international hotel design. Puerto Rican authorities having resolved to contribute to the tourism industry's development, the project was assigned through a state competition. The project's promotion agency, which rejected the Hispanophile leanings of two American projects, deliberately chose a modern style, and invited the Hilton Company's representatives, selected to manage the hotel, to visit the Jaraguá Hotel in Santo Domingo,<sup>3</sup> to let them see for themselves the new style's virtues and how appropriate it was for tourism. This superb hotel served to promote and publicize the 'new spirit' the country was living.

THE 300-BEDROOM building is located on the small island of San Juan, a privileged site with remains of Spanish military fortifications, beaches and excellent views onto the sea and the peninsula (*fig. 1*). The complex's well-articulated, dynamic and open shape emphasizes the building's exterior and creates a close link with the site. The building accommodating the bedrooms composes the dominant vertical structure. A second building, horizontal and perpendicular to the tower, completes the cruciform layout. Public spaces and parts reserved to the hotel's services are located in a semi-underground basement, on the hotel's two first floors. The central part, devoted to lifts for clients and staff and to the main staircase, joins the two structures.

Bedrooms (39 per story) are laid out on both sides of a corridor. Most dispose of a balcony, slightly turned and adjusted to enjoy the view at best. This distinctive characteristic serves as a gigantic climatic protection, like a vast screen clinging to the main body (*fig. 2*). The balconies are placed 13 inches lower than the bedroom level, which allows for a full view from the interior, without the usual interference of the balcony railing. The hotel's entrance has an easy access and the progression towards the building is varied (*fig. 3*). The awning is independent and distant from the entrance hall, and a covered walkway through foliage guides the visitor. There are no doors. As a stimulus and reward, the visitor catches a framed glimpse of the sea, gardens and swimming pool with a vast terrace and bar. A relaxed atmosphere, an open and clear space, elegant in its simplicity, characterize the entire entrance hall and the lounge. The vegetation, panorama, breeze, gardens and ponds and even animals (flamingos and peacocks) are part and parcel of this architecture surrounded with tropical plants.

THE HOTEL'S INTERIOR, designed by the Warner-Leeds firm of New York, significantly adds to this very special architectural work's value. The photographs of the completed project are the work of renowned photographer Ezra Stoller.

- A MARQUESINA
- B ACCESO
- C TIENDAS
- D BARRA
- E TERRAZA
- F PISCINA
- G ESTAR
- H REGISTRO
- I SERVICIOS



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Fig. 3. **Toro y Ferrer**, Caribe Hilton hotel, access story

THE CARIBE HILTON received the silver medal during the 8th Pan-American Congress of Architects, celebrated in Havana in 1950, and was the subject of press coverage in several international journals.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Toro y Ferrer were charged with the hotel's extension, and the works carried out respect the project's spirit. Unfortunately, in the past few years the hotel has undergone changes that hardly respect the initial design.

FOR AN ARCHITECTURAL FIRM that made a name for itself by promoting the modern vocabulary to which it identified, the challenge of designing a building for Puerto Rico's Supreme Court was significant. Located on the far end of a large esplanade, the rectangle-shaped building is precise and raised two levels above ground. It dominates the horizontal place, distinctly endowing it with a mood of quiet balance and peace (fig. 4). The Supreme Court, which rises from the ground, avoids the arena stand effect thanks to a partly marble-covered flight of stairs and platform. It also boasts a monumental hall and cupola, and its row of columns deserves

Fig. 4. **Toro y Ferrer**, Supreme Court



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appreciation as well as the main staircase. All the elements of the classic institutional architecture are present in this work whose spirit and vocabulary are nonetheless modern. The layout of the access, composed of an axis including the pond and front flight of stairs, could only be designed on a diagonal line; the slab is laid out in carefully selected sections of marble, and the cupola, lowered and asymmetrically placed above the structure, covers the main room whose open walls allow it to welcome a larger public, thus symbolizing justice and her relationship with the people. Finally, the impressive spiral staircase that projects itself outside the volume, in a daunting structure-sculpture scheme, gives the visitor the impression of being introduced into a transparent box. The international airport and governmental offices adjoining the Capitol are also inspiring realizations of the time.

Alongside its important realizations in the field of public building, the Toro y Ferrer practice carried out many private projects, for single and collective housing. In this category, the dwellings realized for Leticia Ferrer de García in Miramar, San Juan, should be mentioned. Designed in 1953, the building consists of two blocks, one shifting from the other horizontally, and vertically by half a story (figs. 5 & 6). The spatial organization comprising two dwellings per story solves the exposure problems that these many angles imply, with the longest side facing south, allowing for an appropriate ventilation of the north-western façade, for all the bedrooms and living rooms. The ingenious device makes the most of the ground's slope, it reduces to the minimum the amount of passageways that converge at the core of the building, it allows a private access for each unit, and places the service areas, barrier-like, in the areas that are the less comfortable climate-wise.

During their first ten years, Toro y Ferrer use personalized standards and strategies as well as modern movement characteristics that it interprets, develops and tailors to the specific site and time.

THE TORO Y FERRER ARCHITECTURE is made of precise and rectilinear shapes. Façades consist of planes and repetitive elements that provide rhythm and direction. When an angle or curve is introduced, it emphasizes the stylistic intent. Spaces usually possess a clear directionality; they move and direct views or actions and join or intersect other spaces. Proportions and the place of entrance ways and openings add power to the spatial motion.

Toro y Ferrer explores the possibilities of an expanding, fluid, continuous space, and steers clear of spaces defined as static interior boxes. For an indoor-outdoor interaction, limits are insinuated and minimized, or even rub out contiguous planes. The effect is created by implementing large sliding or folding doors, with wooden жалюзи or glass, or walls with floor to ceiling glazed openings, or fore-roofs that soften transitions or filter light, or continuous

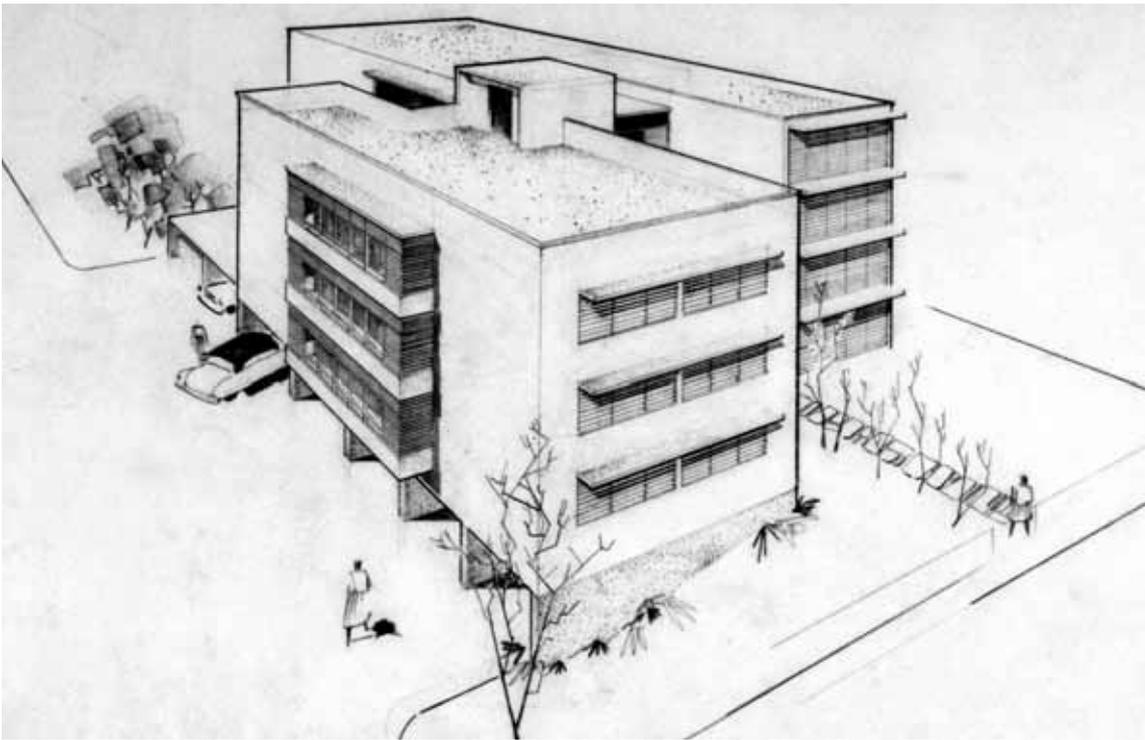


Fig. 5. **Toro y Ferrer**, Leticia Ferrer de Garcia housing development, perspective drawing

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inside-to-outside pavement, or living rooms that stretch out onto terraces or balconies. Interior courtyards are incorporated thanks to plants or walls that are extended to encompass and give shape to exterior spaces. For residential architecture, access is preferably indirect, lateral. Formal frontal alignments or entries are avoided. To ease the way towards the indirect access, spacious walls, handsomely textured, are used. Entryways, sometimes entirely concealed, are located as close as possible to the room's center, thus imposing a lateral access so as to solve the question of circulation, by saving space and sparing

movements. A difference is established between the outdoors, the public space from road to sidewalk, and the private realm of the house, indoors. Once inside however, living areas of each apartment are advantageously interwoven with outdoor spaces.

THE CIRCULATION CORE includes the connection of private and public movements and facilities in a hub that distributes and settles circulation options.

Another of the firm's strategies consists in grouping similar functions together, to form larger shapes, both in

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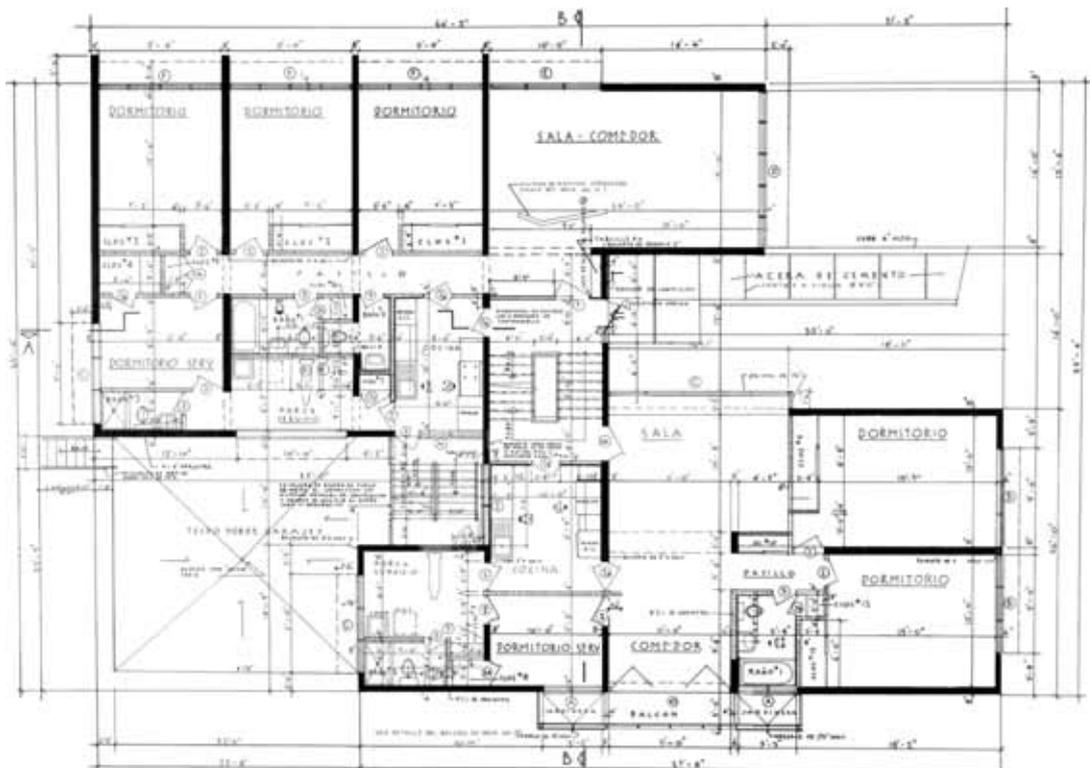


Fig. 6. **Toro y Ferrer**, Leticia Ferrer de Garcia housing development, typical floor plan

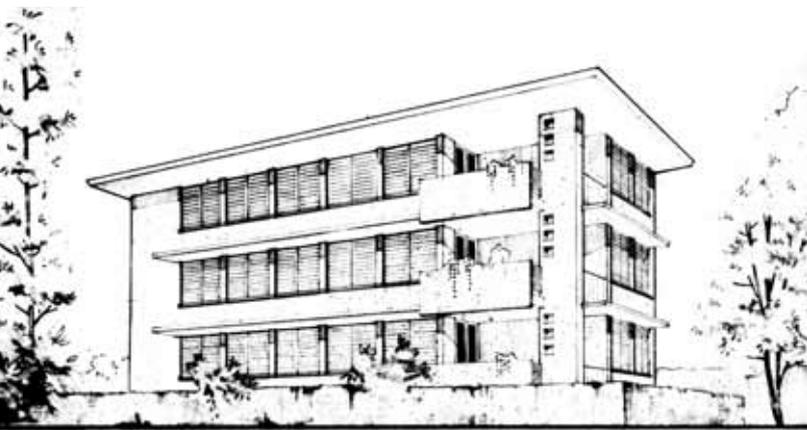


Fig. 7. **Toro y Ferrer**, Gómez-Pizá housing development, perspective



Fig. 8. **Toro y Ferrer**, Gómez-Pizá housing development, current state

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A fair share of Toro y Ferrer's production of that initial period exists no longer, or has suffered considerable damage, at times irreversible. This is a sad example of the neglect or bad treatment that affects modern architecture works of the Puerto Rican heritage.

## CONCLUSION

Toro y Ferrer's initial architectural production has the strength conveyed by fair proportions, careful articulations, elegant project solutions, and the implementation and incorporation of exterior spaces turned into a major feature. It is a work that shows respect towards the site and seeks for the most appropriate use of its resources, of climatic exposure, panorama and topography, while also incorporating discreet technologies, carefully using materials and finishing works. It is not an individualistic expression, but rather a rational architecture, thought out more than felt, whose guiding lines are comprehensible. Sophisticated or aggressive shapes, or those whose major value is novelty, are eschewed.

Toro y Ferrer's production of the first ten years confirms the serious and determined dedication of the architects to quality and efficiency, and to the satisfaction reached through sensible actions coupled with discipline and care. It is a production that uses in a responsible way and takes full advantage of the resources available, depending on the period and space. At the beginning of a period of intense social and economic development for Puerto Rico, the works achieved by Toro y Ferrer contrived to make the most of the country's many capacities, and revealed the potential of a healthy and measured growth.

**JUAN MARQUÉS MERA** is an architect living in San Juan, Puerto Rico. A graduate of the first class of the School of architecture at the University of San Juan in 1971, he taught architecture until 2001 and was Dean of the School for a time. He also conducted research on modern architecture in Porto Rico, Cuba and Dominican Republic and designed several houses, commercial spaces and interior decorations in the old San Juan. Frequently invited to architectural juries in Puerto Rico and Jamaica, Juan Marqués Mera has extensively written in specialized publications. He has also recently established a fund to support student travelling.

Translated by **Isabelle Kite**

## NOTES

- 1 Osvaldo Toro (1914–1996) is a graduate of Columbia University, United States (1937). Miguel Ferrer (1915–2004) is a graduate of Cornell University. From 1945 to 1952, considering engineer Luis Torregrosa as a main partner, the firm has been known as Toro, Ferrer y Torregrosa. From 1952 up to 1984, the firm's name became Toro y Ferrer, as generally known.
- 2 The Toro y Ferrer Collection can be found at the Architecture and Construction Archives of the University of Puerto Rico (AACUPR). It consists of some 267 projects, written documents, photos, illustrations and cuttings prepared by the architectural practice.
- 3 Built by architect Guillermo González Sánchez, it was inaugurated in 1942 and has been demolished. It was a masterpiece of the history of modern architecture in Santo Domingo.
- 4 The category's gold medal was awarded to Ancap (Uruguay), for the realization of low-priced houses, and the Honors prize went to the Casa del Desierto, by Richard Neutra. *Arquitectura*, June 1950.

plan and in volume. These shapes are articulated, that is to say signaled or differentiated, to facilitate their interpretation as single units. The spaces that are repeated, such as bedrooms, form larger rooms. On the other hand, a hierarchy of shape, position or size characterizes the main spaces, the spaces that grow bigger when they are interwoven with the outdoors. Attention to climate, such as exposure or protection against rain or sun, is a steady feature of the firm's production. Taking advantage of the panoramic view or of the topography is also a constant feature. In houses, bedrooms and living rooms have the best exposure, whereas bathrooms, kitchens and toilets are the least favorably exposed.

THE STRUCTURES used are rational, realized in reinforced concrete made with the technical and constructive means that are available. The firm's production during that period makes use of only modest spans and spacing. Some structural solutions for specific elements, such as the Supreme Court and the Caribe Hilton's stairways, are outstanding. Toro y Ferrer also stands out for the architects' acute attention to detail, emphasizing the identification and articulation of elements and their connection. Their preference goes to local materials, concrete for structures and hydraulic binder-based slabs or terrazzo for floor coverings. Wall veneers of rough limestone also typify the practice's work during that period.