

106 SUCCESS STORY

International Collaboration Leads to World Heritage Site Preservation

San Juan, Puerto Rico



“This collaboration gave the staff of San Juan National Historic Site an opportunity to review its preservation techniques and methods, which resulted in a preservation program that has won awards and continues to receive world-wide recognition.”

— WALTER J. CHAVEZ
Superintendent,
San Juan National Historic Site



THE STORY

Puerto Rico had been inhabited for centuries by Taíno and other Arawak Indians when Christopher Columbus discovered the island on his second voyage to the New World and claimed it for Spain in 1493. The island is strategically located in the Caribbean and in 1539, King Charles V of Spain authorized construction of fortifications to protect the port of San Juan and control entry to the harbor. The fortifications consisted of a major defensive wall (muralla) connecting and forming the bases of a series of defensive structures—La Fortaleza, Castillo San Felipe del Morro, and Castillo San Cristóbal. Designed following well-established European military principles, La Muralla de San Juan measured 3 miles. The San Juan fortifications defended the Spanish city from international attacks for 300 years until the Spanish-American War when U.S. warships shelled the port in a day-long bombardment. Six months later, the war ended, and Spain transferred Puerto Rico to the United States under the Treaty of Paris.

Recognized as a National Historic Site in 1949, the San Juan fortifications remained a U.S. military post until 1961 when the properties came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS). The San Juan National Historic Site—San Felipe del Morro, San Cristóbal, Fortín San Juan de la Cruz (on an adjacent island), and portions of the muralla—is exemplary in the use of historic construction methods of European colonial military architecture in the Caribbean, and, along with La Fortaleza (the San Juan Commonwealth Governor’s Residence) were inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1983.

THE PROJECT

Centuries of hurricanes, earthquakes, military bombardments, and wave erosion caused serious deterioration of the walls and their foundations. Anticipating the celebration of the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992, the NPS proposed a major program to stabilize and repair the masonry fortification walls.

THE 106 PROCESS

NPS was the federal agency carrying out this project and responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on

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National Park Service workers rebuild portions of the San Juan National Historic Site (photo courtesy NPS). For 475 years, the story of the fort and surrounding structures is vivid and inviting.

historic properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

Over centuries, the walls had been constructed, rebuilt, and repaired with varying construction materials and techniques creating a complex and difficult structure to maintain. Repairs were often performed with historically incompatible materials and technologies, sometimes damaging the historic structural integrity of the fortifications. The military and architectural history of Caribbean fortifications had been studied extensively, but the different construction materials and their site preservation, restoration, and maintenance had not been considered comprehensively.

In 1998, the NPS, Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Officer, US International Committee for Monuments and Sites, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, and Puerto Rico Conservation Trust initiated consultation to identify treatment processes and priorities for La Muralla de San Juan, administered by both the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the NPS. The following year, experts from the Getty Conservation Institute, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, United States, Mexico, Portugal, England, and Colombia provided protocols and recommendations for the fortifications. Based on extensive investigations on the historic construction materials and technologies, the NPS adopted the philosophical approach that the entire San Juan fortification system would be considered as one site, regardless of ownership and including those sections not part of the World Heritage nomination. In 2003, the NPS concluded a Programmatic Agreement to guide ongoing maintenance programs and intervention processes.

THE SUCCESS

After years of inappropriate interventions, today the NPS is committed to an ongoing effort to understand the historic walls, mortars, and plaster coats through laboratory investigations and use of modern technologies, thereby developing case-specific solutions. Instead of reacting to failures, the NPS has a maintenance methodology for the differing wall typologies to preserve the centuries-old masonry fortifications of the World Heritage site. The San Juan National Historic Site preservation program has been taught and used internationally to assist historic site stewards in understanding the centuries-old resources and how to use modern technologies to maintain them.



A view of Castillo San Felipe del Morro, a unit of San Juan National Historic Site

Consulting Parties:

National Park Service
ACHP
Puerto Rico State Historic
Preservation Officer
Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña
Puerto Rico Department of
Transportation and Public Works

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106 and the ACHP go
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