

January 2014. Vol. 18, No. 1. – Preserving a Hometown Corner for Posterity: Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property – Molly Garfinkel



CultureWork

A digital broadside for arts & culture workers

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By CultureWork, on January 29th, 2014

Welcome to the Winter 2014 issue of CultureWork!

This issue features background and future plans for a nomination of the South Bronx’s Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property on the National Registry of Historic Places. Within historic preservation policies in the United States, Casita Rincón Criollo has served as a challenge and a model for better integrating folklorists into the process of registry.

Using a historical overview Molly Garfinkel, Director of Place Matters, outlines the territory of issues involved in this complex and challenging process. Additionally, the following article introduces Place Matters as a program that identifies, promotes, supports, and protects distinctive cultural traditions and environments in New York City.

Regards,

Julie Voelker-Morris

Robert Voelker-Morris

Editors

CultureWork Pages

Preserving a Hometown Corner for Posterity: Casita Rincón Criollo as a Traditional Cultural Property

Molly Garfinkel, Director, Place Matters

In 2011, the [American Folklore Society](#) (AFS) approved the creation of the Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy working group. As a member of this group, City Lore's [Place Matters](#) program is pursuing a project that serves as a model for better integrating folklorists and the perspectives of our field within U.S. historic preservation policy (American Folklore Society). With support and guidance from the National Park Service and New York State Historic Preservation Office staff, and in collaboration with colleagues from AFS working group members including Dr. Michael Ann Williams and graduate students from the Folk



Casita Rincon Criollo, 2012, by Molly Garfinkel

Studies Masters program at Western Kentucky University, Place Matters is laying the groundwork for a nomination of the South Bronx's Casita Rincón Criollo. Casita Rincón Criollo is a Puerto Rican cultural center and model Traditional Cultural Property (TCP) according to folklorists' understanding of National Register Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties* (1990). As Rincón Criollo challenges standard preservation evaluation criteria, this case study seeks to prove the casita's considerable and continuing significance by relying heavily on folklore methodologies that are not typically included in Register nominations.

Register Nomination: Working with Existing Preservation Policies

Founded in 1986, [City Lore](#) documents, presents, and advocates for New York City's grassroots cultures to ensure their living legacy in stories and histories, places and traditions. In 1998, City Lore and the Municipal Art Society founded the [Place Matters](#) program to collaborate with the public in interpreting and advocating for New York City's important community landmarks. Since that time, the program has explored ways that place nurtures culture, identity, and tradition. The initiative has pushed the policy parameters of established historic preservation channels by presenting reasons for valuing community places that pose conservation challenges.

Passed in 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) authorized the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), "the official list of the nation's historical places worthy of preservation" (National Park Service, 2013). Administered by the National Park Service, the National Register provides criteria for identifying, evaluating, and preserving America's historic and archaeological resources (National Park Service, 2013) Properties are evaluated by age, integrity, and significance, and the list includes buildings, structures, and sites; groups of buildings, structures, or sites forming historic districts; landscapes; and individual objects. Each state also has its own list of locally significant sites. Today, nominations (the documentation required to officially recommend a site for designation) to the National Register usually come from State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) or Tribal Preservation Offices (TPO).

Register listing is largely honorific—it symbolizes that a place has been deemed significant to the history of the state and country. Designation does not guarantee protection, and it does not prevent the state or the property owner from demolishing or altering the building or site. However, owners of designated income-producing properties are eligible to apply for historic tax credits to support renovations, and the government is obligated to review a Register-listed property if the property will be affected by publicly supported development.

Place Matters is currently utilizing the infrastructure of the NHPA's policies and programs to nominate Casita Rincón Criollo as a "Traditional Cultural Property," or TCP, to the New York State and National Registers. TCP criteria were released in 1990, in National Register Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, in order to expand the range of site types that could be considered eligible for the National Register. Designation on the National Register as a TCP suggests a living site—one that continues to play a role in fostering cultural heritage and a sense of community. A TCP is "eligible for inclusion in the National Register because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community's history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community (Parker & King, 1990). Structural integrity can also be evaluated within the context of use over time. When physical alterations have been made in response to functional needs to accommodate traditional activities, they are not considered to have had a negative impact on the property's integrity (Place Matters, 2014).

TCP designation has typically been applied (but not confined) to sacred American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian sites. One important previous example of a non-indigenous site listed as a TCP is Bohemian Hall and Park in Astoria, Queens, which comfortably meets the parameters of TCP guidelines. In 1999, Place Matters collaborated with the New York SHPO to successfully nominate sites significant to three different cultural communities in New York City. In cultural terms, Bohemian Hall and Park in Astoria, Queens most closely relates to the significance of the casita. Bohemian Hall is an assemblage of three buildings—a Czech social club, performance hall and beer garden. Each of these were (and are) still being used by the Czech and Slovak communities, thanks, in part, to structural alterations made over time to accommodate the continuation of traditional *sokol* (Czech gymnastics) practices that take place there. Together they were designated as a Traditional Cultural Property on State and National Registers in 2001. (1) While Casita Rincón Criollo serves many of the same community and cultural functions as Bohemian Hall, it poses additional challenges to National Register evaluation criteria.

La Casita: Making a Home in the City

Literally "small houses", casitas are cabins, bungalows, or cottages surrounded by gardens that recall the look and feel of rural Puerto Rico (Martinez, 2010). New York City's casitas are derived from balloon-frame vernacular housing of Puerto Rico's countryside (Aponte-Parés, 1999). During the 19th century, the islands' architectural traditions were heavily influenced by mercantile and cultural exchange between the United States and the Caribbean. Ceded to the U.S. in 1898 as bounty of the Spanish-American war, the United States invaded, occupied, and colonized Puerto Rico, eventually designating it an unincorporated territory of the United States. In 1917 Puerto Ricans were made U.S. citizens. By the 1920s, mechanized agriculture displaced rural farmers, forcing their migration to urban areas to work in the expanding sugar industry. The dispossessed workers re-imagined the rural casita tradition to their new urban context (Sciorra, 1996).

With citizenship, Puerto Ricans could travel freely to the U.S. mainland, and New York City was the destination of choice. During the 1920s and 1930s, Puerto Ricans settled primarily in El Barrio (East Harlem), the Lower East Side, and Brooklyn. Massive migrations from the 1940s onward, as well as displacement resulting from the construction of public housing in El Barrio, led many to reestablish in the South Bronx (Singer & Martinez, 2004). Then as now, most permanently settled in New York City, while others circulated between the Island and the Mainland, thereby, facilitating constant "creative reinvention of national traditions" (Flores, 2000, p. 12). The heritage of the Puerto Rican casita is reflected in the informal constellation of casitas that dot vacant lots throughout the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn (Hopkin, 2012). Architect and scholar Luis Aponte-Parés identified casitas as architecture of resistance to the economic, political and social marginalization experienced by Puerto Ricans in 20th and 21st century New York City. But casitas have also been an architecture of activation, validation, and self-identification. Casitas have helped to anchor Puerto Rican communities in the face of urban renewal and displacement processes. Aponte-Parés, wrote, "building casitas is a act of reterritorialization that affirms the power of culture in

space while offering resistance to further deterritorialization by appropriating place in the urban environment” (Aponte-Parés , 1995, p. 14). Casitas in New York City mirror the idea of the rural experience in the urban setting. But, in New York City, they serve a different function: the spatial organization of the house and site are integrated such that together they function as social club, cultural center, and extended living room for local Puerto Rican residents.

One of the city’s oldest, longest-surviving, and largest casitas, Rincón Criollo (Hometown Corner), occupies its second city-owned site in the Melrose neighborhood in the South Bronx. Also known as “La Casita de Chema” after founder José Manuel “Chema” Soto, or simply “La Casita,” Rincón Criollo was founded in the late 1970s, when Soto and his neighbors reclaimed an abandoned, garbage-filled lot on 158th Street and Brook Avenue. Like most casitas, Rincón Criollo has always been vulnerable to redevelopment because it occupies publicly owned land. In 1996, the City’s Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD) announced it would put many of the city’s gardens on the auction block. Rincón Criollo made room for low-incoming housing in 2007, but thanks to loyal supporters who rallied to save it, La Casita de Chema was reestablished down the block on another city-owned property at 157th Street and Brook Avenue.

The original Casita Rincón Criollo was a two-room structure fronted by a verandah, and surrounded by a play yard, an expansive tool shed, fruit trees, and gardens of flowers and vegetables. As is common in Puerto Rico, a clean-swept small yard without vegetation, known as a *batey*, surrounded the house and was separated from the gardens by a picket fence. There was a kitchen with running water and a ramp for visitors in wheelchairs. The casita’s exterior was originally painted grey and white, and was subsequently refreshed with a coat of yellow, and then later, aquamarine (Solomon, 1989). When it was reborn on 157th Street and Brook Avenue, Rincón Criollo was constructed entirely of wood. Smaller than its predecessor, the second casita also has two rooms, and the porch that runs along the front of the little house features a ramp, as well as a diagonal cross balustrade similar to the one that graced the original casita. Chema says this design element reminds him of houses built in the Puerto Rican countryside (J. Soto, 2012). This casita’s bright teal exterior is also reminiscent of color palates seen in Caribbean built environments.

Rincón Criollo: A Model Traditional Cultural Property

City Lore has been well acquainted with Rincón Criollo since the mid-1980s, and the casita community has collaborated with City Lore’s Urban Folklore and Place Matters’ initiatives on a number of programs over the last several decades. The casita’s interest in participating in the TCP nomination project, which might otherwise seem like outsider interference, is based largely on the relationship cultivated through work with Dr. Roberta Singer, an ethnomusicologist and City Lore co-founder. Ethnographic research, including casita members’ insights and testimonies, will be essential for demonstrating Rincón Criollo’s long-standing significance and suitability for listing as a Traditional Cultural Property.

Neighbors who grew up in Puerto Rico, and those who have visited family there, say that crossing the threshold from the street into Rincón Criollo’s property marks a transition from being in the Bronx to being on the Island. According to one member, “it is a little piece of Puerto Rico in the South Bronx.” Rincón Criollo survives from the earliest days of casita building in New York City, and has become famous throughout Puerto Rico and in Diaspora communities. La Casita is at the heart of the renaissance of *bomba* and *plena* (traditional Afro-Puerto Rican musical genres) in NYC, which has, in turn, inspired a renaissance on the Island. According to Singer and folklorist Elena Martínez, Rincón Criollo is the center of traditional Puerto Rican music in New York City; it’s a place where traditions have been passed down through three generations (Singer & Martinez, 2012).

Rincón Criollo’s leading role in maintaining and transmitting Puerto Rican cultural tradition makes it highly appropriate for listing as a Traditional Cultural Property. Los Pleneros de la 21, New York’s preeminent *bomba* and *plena* organization since 1982, grew out of Rincón Criollo. Twenty-year old Mathew Gonzalez, whose grandfather, Benny Ayala, was one of the

casita's founding members, says that La Casita continues to provide the foundation for his own musical career. Gonzalez learned to play and love *bomba* and *plena* at Rincón Criollo, and he now plays in the city's premiere salsa and Latin jazz bands as well as with his own group, Cumbayala, which has carried on the *bomba* and *plena* traditions. But Rincón Criollo is not just important to him personally—it has been the nucleus of the contemporary local



Puerto Rican music scene. As Gonzalez noted, “that’s the glue. The *casita* is the base of everything from starting to end” (Singer & Martinez, 2012). Singer (personal correspondence, 2013) suggested that,

In the absence of a traditional context for the transmission of tradition, new contexts are created that become traditional. This concept is clearly manifested in La Casita but it’s a fairly common phenomenon across most [im]migrant communities. What is so special about La Casita is its tenacity, the result of which is providing a traditional context for several generations. (See City Lore footage of [Rincón Criollo](#))

Rincón Criollo: A Preservation Challenge

Rincón Criollo meets National Register Criterion A for its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history, namely Puerto Rican migration to the United States, the Puerto Rican experience of life within the United States, and the continuation of cultural expressions unique to Puerto Rican communities in the United States (Hopkin, 2012). Aponte-Parés (2000) also noted that casitas are important cultural objects for telling the history of America’s postwar urban transformations—how the most disenfranchised urban dwellers literally built spaces of community and hope out of the detritus of municipally sanctioned disinvestment.

Rincón Criollo’s reconstruction and changed property boundaries might lead preservation agencies to determine that it has lost its architectural integrity, and therefore, is not worthy of protection. City Lore disagrees. Within our arguments to place Rincón Criollo as an important TCP to preserve, Place Matters will explicitly use the continuing transmission of musical tradition as a rationale for listing. We will also invoke Bulletin 38 to make the case that (a) portability actually defines the casita typology, and (b) the relocation and reconstruction were made to sustain the integral cultural practices that have taken place there over time. Ninety percent of the materials that created the second casita came from the first site, including the sturdy beams (C. Soto, 2012).

A disconnect exists between the integrity of the physical entity from the preservation perspective and the integrity of cultural association and process from the social sciences, humanities, folklore, and, most importantly, community perspectives. Folklorist Dr. Joseph Sciorra (1996) wrote, “the open-endedness of architectural activity illustrates that the casita is viewed as an unfinished entity involved in the ongoing process of becoming” (p. 73). To Rincón Criollo members, it *is* La Casita and providing for its upkeep is as important as ever.

As Chema's son, Carlos Soto (2012), said, "yeah, construction never ends. We have to change something that's broken, or torn apart, or getting old. I mean, wear and tear on a car, on anything, eventually you have to change some parts. We have to keep the casita strong." La Casita is also less than 50 years old, which is normally the lowest age threshold for a property to be considered historic, and eligible for listing. However, we intend to prove that Rincón Criollo is not merely historic.

La Casita: An Endangered Typology

In 1987, the Bronx Council on the Arts initiated the *Casita* project, a documentation campaign to support the Puerto Rican community and educate the public about casitas. Folklorist Sciorra, anthropologist Susan Slymovics, City Lore-affiliated photographer Martha Cooper, historic preservationist and folklorist Nancy Solomon, and architect Aponte-Parés visited casitas throughout New York City at that time. They collected data on nearly 65 casitas predominantly located in the Bronx, East Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Based on fieldwork and interviews conducted by Western Kentucky University folklorists Rachel Hopkin and Caitlin Coad, as of 2013, less than half of the casitas documented in 1987-1988 remain. The New York City casita may, therefore, be an endangered typology, which makes it especially appropriate for inclusion in the National and State Registers at this time. We are working to create a survey of extant casitas in New York City so that New York SHPO can establish the significance of the property type and determine the typical features that define the casita typology. SHPO will use this context report to evaluate Rincón Criollo against other existing casitas. We are confident they will determine it is an outstanding example of the typology according to Register criteria and worthy of nomination, and we believe that including emic perspectives in the nomination report will help support its designation as a TCP.

Preserving Community History: A Continuing Conversation

As Dolores Hayden (1999) noted in her seminal book, *The Power of Place*, "it is not enough to add on a few African American or Native American projects, or a few women's projects, and assume that preserving urban history is handled well in the United States in the 1990s" (p. 8). (2) In the second decade of the 21st century, we are still struggling to make public history and preservation genuinely and universally inclusive. In the last several years, a number of discrete initiatives have explicitly



Rincón Criollo, early 1990s, by City Lore photographer Martha Cooper

engaged underrepresented communities in national preservation programs. But we must find ways to systemically redress the lack of diversity represented in the Register and to permanently integrate broadened approaches to underrepresented communities into existing preservation machinations. This means changing the criteria for evaluating what can and should be included in these lists, as well as asking community members what places they value rather than trying to guess and assess from the outside. Incorporating folklore methodologies like ethnographic documentation can help bring us closer to these goals.

The rate and scope of change in American cities have increased quite substantially in the last several decades, and urban places are increasingly defined by multiple narratives and histories. These changes mean that places, whether individual buildings, blocks, neighborhoods, or whole boroughs, are like palimpsests—ancient manuscripts or parchments used as writing material. Palimpsests contained text that was scraped off so that the piece could be reused, leaving traces of earlier verses still visible. Listing on the National Register will not guarantee Rincón Criollo protection from development. But, as a threatened, under-resourced entity that must continuously self-advocate and mobilize every asset at its disposal, Rincón Criollo would benefit from leveraging designation as an officially significant national resource so that it does not become a mere trace on the historical landscape.

Rincón Criollo's designation as a Traditional Cultural Property would result in broader, more nuanced recognition of Puerto Ricans' historic and continuing contributions to American cultural life and acknowledge Puerto Ricans' role in shaping New York City's identity. It would enhance the State and National Registers' missions of equitably supporting resources that represent our society's textured cultural heritage. Should La Casita lose its next battle with development, documentation materials will be available through a free, public database. In the current milieu of privatization and consumerism, designating La Casita—a notable site of cultural production and innovation, and not of consumption—would symbolize a laudable shift toward valuing cultural expression as well as stylistic expression, integrity of tradition as well as of structure, and continuity as well as history.

Further Considerations for Readers

Based on the AFS working group's experience with state and national preservation programs, I offer the following suggestions to individuals or groups interested in pursuing a TCP nomination or similar preservation and conservation projects.

- Models need to be developed with all interested collaborators at the table from the onset: SHPO office, local community, folklorist, National Register staff;
- Comparables will be important in order to answer the question “Why designate this particular site as opposed to other similar sites?”
- Provide strong evidence on how local communities define the boundaries of the proposed TCP; ensure that the site has historic time depth as well as values and associations that continue to the present with an active traditional community;
- Make clear and justify that the TCP *is* significant to a “traditional cultural community” and not just an “interest group;”
- Make a case for the historic integrity of the site: Does the traditional community still use and view the place the same way?
- Stronger nominations have multiple lines of evidence: archival, published ethnographic evidence, oral history;
- The “voice” of the nomination must be seen as the local community, not the participating folklorist/outsider: while federal agencies now look more toward ethnographers, experts need to be elders/people in the community.

Additional information and suggestions can be found on the [working group's page](#) of the American Folklore Society.

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Author Note

Garfinkel directs the Place Matters program at City Lore, where she is fortunate to participate in projects ranging from cultural resource management, public and museum education, exhibit curation, collections archiving and traditional arts presentation. Her research explores Western and non-Western building traditions, theories of cultural

landscapes, and histories of urbanism and city planning. She has research and designed “Centuries of Making Change Work,” the permanent introductory exhibit at the Sandy Spring Museum in Sandy Spring, MD; Place Matters’ web-based virtual tour, “Seeing East 4th Street: Vernacular Architecture in New York City;” and “B’Ville Voices,” a forthcoming web-exhibit, public art and community history project for Baldwinsville, NY.

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1. Folklorist Dr. Joseph Sciorra’s research on the grotto served as the basis for the nomination for Staten Island’s Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Grotto, written by NYSHPO’s Kathy Howe and listed as a TCP in 2000.

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