

Controversy Over Nuns' Remains Rattles City's Revitalization Effort

In Old San Juan, Residents Endure Clash of Culture and Commerce

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OLD SAN JUAN – When they gambled that a casino would cinch the success of a posh new hotel here, local entrepreneurs failed to take into account one thing: the power of nuns, not all of them alive.

Claiming that more than 100 of their deceased sisters may be buried underneath the landmark El Convento Hotel, which for two centuries served as a Spanish convent, Puerto Rico's order of Carmelite nuns has been leading a protest against furnishing its order's former home with blackjack tables, roulette wheels and slot machines.

The nuns' action was prompted by the discovery of several empty crypts last April during renovation to install a swanky glass elevator in the 345-year-old building. Subsequent investigations of records kept by the order, which abandoned the convent in 1903 and today lives in a monastery 10 miles outside the Old City, indicate the ground beneath the hotel also is honeycombed with crypts, the majority of which still contain remains.

Among the sisters recorded as buried there are descendants of conquistador Juan Ponce de Leon, and ancestors of former Puerto Rico governor and island statehood party founder Luis A. Ferre.

The nuns' protest is one of the more colorful controversies thrown into relief as Old San Juan attempts to simultaneously prosper from and preserve its cultural historic heritage in a modern economic reality. Set to open by Christmas after a \$12.5 million renovation, El Convento, now boasting 59 luxury rooms, five restaurants and a shopping mall, is one of two major hotels gearing up to accommodate and attract more tourists. Both projects are causing concern in this small colonial enclave.

The other hotel, built for \$35 million, is the 242-room Wyndham Old San Juan Hotel and Casino on the waterfront, which greets 1 million tourists from cruise ships each year. That hotel is seen as an anchor project for a \$135-million development plan for the entire waterfront.

At nine stories, the sprawling Wyndham has been criticized by Old San Juan residents for eclipsing once-pleasant views of the bay from a southern sector of the city, as well as vistas of the city from the bay. Moreover, critics say, the Wyndham's monolithic architecture strikes a dissonant visual chord against the city's quaint 17th-century charm.

“Blocking the views in that way was insensitive to the beauty of the city,” says resident Alberto Nazario, president of the 200-member Community Council. But most merchants in the sector, such as one restaurateur whose outdoor seating no longer affords sights of the bay, shrug off the aesthetic compromise. “It’s going to bring a lot more people to the area, which is good for business,” he says.

Indeed, this small peninsular outpost of 10,000 residents, distinguished by cobblestone streets, balustraded balconies, Easter-egg color schemes and stoic Spanish forts, has been visibly vitalized by an upsurge of tourism. Island tourism has doubled since 1985, to 4 million visitors a year. And Old San Juan, the second-oldest European settlement in the New World, enjoys top billing as the star attraction.

As Puerto Rico successfully markets its unique advantages as a Caribbean destination (U.S. currency, no passports required and a bilingual service sector), Old San Juan has experienced a corresponding transformation.

A fever of restoration has swept through one street after another in recent years. It seems every building, from private homes to the post office, is getting a makeover, generally faithful to the original architecture. Most of the long-abandoned buildings have been bought up during this renaissance. Property values have soared. And many businesses are thriving on the influx of tourists.

Beautification projects such as the Paseo de la Princesa waterfront promenade, built in 1992 for the 500th anniversary of the island’s discovery, have enhanced the city’s allure. More important, beefed-up security has made Old San Juan one of the relatively safe spots on the island.

Yet as the pendulum swings more toward prosperity, many residents dwell on the concessions they’ve had to make in exchange. “Traffic through our narrow streets grows more horrendous daily, ruining the cobblestones,” local activist Nazario points out. Public buses, decorated as trolleys to ferry tourists throughout the city, only aggravate the congestion; the fake trolleys are so wide they practically run people off the sidewalks.

Residents must also cope with inflated prices at many restaurants. The ubiquitous clamoring of jackhammers and pile drivers for construction has given some residents to wearing ear plugs. And gentrification unleashed by prosperity threatens to homogenize what has been a population of mixed classes and races.

Most residents gladly help tourists with directions, but admit that steering people toward the Hard Rock Cafe gets tedious after a while. All this makes for a sometimes awkward symbiosis between residents and tourism.

One of the more vocal voices of caution toward tourist development is that of resident Ricardo Alegria, who founded the Institute of Culture, responsible for the Old City’s preservation codes. “If you respectfully preserve the city in such a way that is good for the Puerto Ricans, the tourists will enjoy it, too,” says

Alegria, who supports the nuns. “But making fundamental changes to appease tourists is wrong.”

“The [hotel] building is a national monument and shouldn’t have been sold by the government in the first place,” he maintains. Purchased by private investors in January for \$3 million, El Convento had run up \$14 million in debt since the government acquired it in 1971. “In any case,” Alegria insists, “a gambling operation is antithetical to the character of the hotel’s location, directly across from the San Juan Cathedral and the Children’s Museum in a designated historic zone.”

Disputing the nuns’ claim that any earthly remains of their order are still buried beneath the hotel, El Convento president Alberto Velasquez says: “A casino is a principal component for making a hotel viable today. It’s what tourists expect.”