

MODERN TIMES —San Juan

Preface

A slice of US-style modernism deep in the heart of the Caribbean, Puerto Rico's El Monte provokes an almost messianic zeal among its adherents. To them, El Monte is not simply a home but an experiment in how to live.

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The Puerto Rican condominium development of El Monte is not the type of place where people wind up living by coincidence or chance. This 33-acre complex just outside San Juan is so thoughtfully designed – so thoroughly planned nearlyout – that it converts envious neighbours into eager buyers, curious architecture admirers into activist owners. Instantly identifiable by its pair of massive, crescent-shaped wings, El Monte's mix of affordable housing, landscaped tropical gardens, central location and

- 01 El Monte Sur is crafted from hurricane-resistant reinforced concrete
- 02 The swimming pool anchors El Monte's outdoor recreation complex



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eco-sensitive design espouses the utopian ideals of post-war America – only deep in the Caribbean basin.

Completed in two major phases between 1960 and 1969, El Monte (Spanish for “the knoll”) was Puerto Rico’s first planned community – an exercise in optimism and urbanism intended for the island’s rapidly expanding middle classes. Set on former slum land just outside San Juan in the new business district of Hato Rey, El Monte was conceived as an all-in-one destination with 780 residences, comprehensive leisure facilities, a swimming pool, primary school and Puerto Rico’s first air-conditioned shopping mall. It’s a Spanish-speaking example of the city-within-a-city concept then appearing across the United States – held together by dense gardens and greenways that conform to El Monte’s linear aesthetic while saluting Puerto Rico’s tropical rainforest topography.

“El Monte’s architecture, planning and landscape architecture are rare, surviving examples of a community-scale modernist design that played out in both

the US and abroad,” says Charles Birnbaum, president of the Washington, DC-based Cultural Landscape Foundation, which declared El Monte a “Marvel of Modernism” in 2008. “As in other 1940s and 1950s residential communities that blurred the lines between the public and private realm – and seamlessly moved its residents from indoors to outdoors – El Monte set the paradigm that established the landscape as the nexus of modernism in the Caribbean.”

Despite that Caribbean locale, El Monte is firmly rooted in the modernist movements that were sweeping through America during its decade-and-a-half of development. The anchor is Harvard University, where El Monte architect Edward Larrabee Barnes studied under modernist masters such as Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, while chief landscape architect Hideo Sasaki served as chairman of Harvard’s Department of Landscape Architecture for a decade. Supported by liberal New York congressman and developer James Scheuer,



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- 01 Passageway linking the parking lot to the private gardens
- 02 El Monte resident Alberto Ceide in the complex’s lush gardens
- 03 Hard right angles and fluid design espouse architectural optimism
- 04 Resident Dolores Rodriguez
- 05 El Monte’s curvatures from on high
- 06 One of a handful of El Monte’s stand-alone townhouses
- 07 Academic Santiago Gala
- 08 Gala’s original 1950s-era bathroom
- 09 Gala’s living room



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RESIDENT OI Santiago Gala Preservationist

Puerto Rico-born Gala comes from a Cuban family that fled to the island in 1963. Raised in the San Juan area, Gala spent much of his childhood fascinated by El Monte. He finally moved into a two-bedroom apartment in El Monte Sur in 2004, still



dazzled by its architecture but with little understanding of its historic and aesthetic importance. “Back then I had no idea who Edward Larrabee Barnes even was, but I felt a great obligation to educate myself,” says Gala, who’s led much of El Monte’s restoration schemes. As both an owner and its chief preservationist, Gala has an insider view of the El Monte community. To him, it represents a relief from Puerto Rico’s car culture and a return to a more human scale of living. “It’s wonderful to have a shoe repair shop across the street or a school within your gardens,” he says.

Gala’s own apartment is decorated with furniture and art that adheres to El Monte’s mid-century provenance. His paintings are mostly by Puerto Rican and Latin American artists including Augusto Marín, Nick Quijano and Heriberto Portell Vilá, as well as large portraits of Gala’s family.



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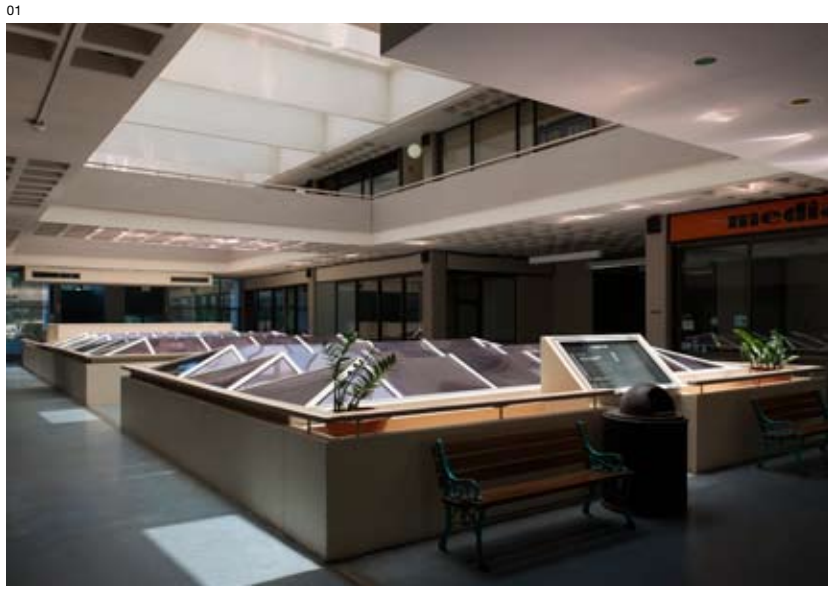
Barnes' plan was comprised mostly of one- to three-bedroom apartments in the tower duo – along with 124 standalone townhouses and a handful of garden apartments. Sasaki's designs, meanwhile, used native trees and precisely positioned shrubbery to soften Barnes' rigid architecture, create distinctive outdoor leisure zones and provide orderly orientation and pathways to link them all.

The buildings were cast from reinforced concrete, often a foot thick, which was both affordable and durable in this hurricane-prone region. Rising up to 14 floors, the towers are distinctively broad, yet relatively slim, and each apartment extends the building's entire depth to maximise island breezes and minimise the need for air-conditioning. Along the towers' façades, brise soleil-styled overhangs provide additional ventilation and control natural light, while a trio of open-air corridors help further funnel air through the structures.

Although it was converted into an ownership co-operative in 1981, El Monte was originally conceived as a rental development and its modestly sized apartments reflect this initial set-up. Every unit is a deep and narrow duplex with a kitchen, dining area and salon on the lower level and the bedrooms upstairs. Period details such as terrazzo tile floors, original kitchen cabinets and retro-styled bathroom fixtures remain in most apartments.

Each residence includes a rectangular balcony to extend El Monte's indoor-outdoor interplay. Some residents have converted the balconies into additional living spaces but El Monte purists resist the temptation in order to preserve both those cooling breezes and the building's aesthetic harmony.

Preservation has become a key mission of El Monte's current owners – which include a large number of architects, artists and professors from the nearby Universidad de Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras. Much of the preservation effort has been led by Santiago Gala, an academic, activist and architect who has lived in El Monte Sur since 2004. Working with the El Monte Neighborhood Association,



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RESIDENT 02
**Maricelis Ramos
& Eduardo Rolón**
Architects

Both Ramos and Rolón have a long history with El Monte. Ramos lived in El Monte Norte during graduate school while Rolón would house-sit for his aunt, who was also an El Monte-dweller. Eventually, the couple bought a two-bedroom unit in El Monte Sur before upgrading to a three-bedroom home in the same building in 2006. The couple were drawn to El Monte's integration of landscaping with the built environment.

"It's a pleasure to see that green buffer between our building and the street. It's nice hearing the sounds of nature coexisting with the sounds of traffic," they say.

The couple's home is a balance between old and new. A classic Le Corbusier LC6 table, for instance, is surrounded by dining room chairs inherited from Rolón's grandmother.

Above all, Ramos and Rolón appreciate El Monte's rough edges and authenticity. "El Monte is well designed... but not super-polished or perfect," they say. "There is a relaxed atmosphere, a sense of community that makes both residents and visitors feel immediately at ease."



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RESIDENT 03
Laura Perez
Journalist

Perez is an investigative journalist for *El Nuevo Dia* – Puerto Rico's largest daily newspaper – and has lived off-and-on in El Monte since 2006. First she shared a three-bedroom unit in El Monte Sur followed by a more recent stint in one of the garden-level casitas, which was homely and private, "but too expensive to buy". Perez ultimately bought a one-bedroom apartment in El Monte Sur in 2012 and converted it into a stylish and functional share-live space that she shares with her cat, Greta.

"I absolutely knew I did not want my work space to be near the living room," says Perez, who regularly visited El Monte as a child. Aided by an interior designer, she converted an empty nook beneath

the staircase into an office that can be hidden behind custom-crafted wooden doors when she's off-duty. The construction effort also gave new life to her kitchen's original cabinets and fixtures and both un-earthed and refinished the apartment's earthy terrazzo flooring. "I approached the effort as a restoration rather than renovation," Perez says. "Because the apartment was already so well preserved."

In keeping with this sentiment, most of Perez's furniture is mid-century – or mid-century-inspired – sourced from local antiques markets or crafted by designer friends. A hammock hanging along the balcony helps connect Perez's to El Monte's peaceful gardens. One element still missing – a washer and dryer, which are banned from individual El Monte apartments. "It's the only drawback at El Monte," she says.



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- 01 The palm-tree fronted entrance
- 02 El Monte's shopping mall
- 03 Residents and architects Maricelis Ramos and Eduardo Rolón
- 04 Laura Perez's living room and balcony
- 05 Journalist Perez in her El Monte Sur home
- 06 Perez's kitchen



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Gala first focused on the grand entry lobbies – whose original colour-rich tiles, hexagonal mosaic floors and redwood banisters were compromised during a 1980s-era renovation.

The tiles were a particularly painful loss. Selected by Barnes himself and patterned in Damien Hirst-like dots, the tiles – produced by Emaux de Briare in France – were an unusually vivid example of the optical art aesthetic coursing through late-1950s visual culture. Gala's team has managed to restore much of this original tile work – most notably in the mail room – with the rest due for completion by 2017. In the meantime, Gala is also working to highlight additional key El Monte design details, including sculptures by American artist Milton Hebard and the massive, atomic-era fallout shelters, as he campaigns to have El Monte listed on America's National Register of Historic Places.

"El Monte is the most outstanding redevelopment project built in Puerto Rico, both in terms of architecture and landscape integration. The diversity of design has encouraged a diversity of populations," Gala says. "As a kid I would drive past El Monte dazzled by these futuristic 'spaceships' rising from the lush vegetation. I didn't expect to one day live there, but even then I knew it was something very special." — (M)

The designers

El Monte was devised by a team of architects, but the names Edward Larrabee Barnes and Hideo Sasaki are the two most closely associated with its design. Barnes was Harvard-trained and Manhattan-based, with a practice that paired glass-and-steel styled modernism with the interior design talents of his wife, Mary Barnes. The project is actually a Barnes anomaly, as the architect is best known for large-scale commercial and civic commissions including Minneapolis's Walker Art Center (1971) and Manhattan's Citigroup Center (1977).

Boston-based Sasaki was a Japanese-American who helped pioneer the type of multi-disciplinary urban planning epitomised by El Monte. As one of Sasaki's oldest and farthest-flung commissions, El Monte remains among his least-known. Rather, his firm Sasaki Associates is recognised for large-scale landscape commissions including San Francisco's One Maritime Plaza (1964) and Charleston's Waterfront Park (1990).

- 01 Some residents have opted for air-conditioning units to complement the island's breezes
- 02 Viewed from the side, El Monte is surprisingly slim



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