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Safety Perception and Tourism Potential in the Informal Neighborhood of “La Perla”, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to explore why the “slum” or informal neighborhood of “La Perla” in San Juan, Puerto Rico has been marginalized as a tourist attraction. Despite the neighborhood’s cultural and tourist values and despite its preeminent location “La Perla” is isolated from San Juan and the millions of tourists that visit the island every year. This paper considers how the idea of tourism in disadvantaged communities, or “slum tourism”, can be adapted and applied in a sustainable manner to “La Perla”. The research presents, as evidence, experimental surveys conducted with residents and tourists aiming to understand the tourism potential and the safety perception of “La Perla”. The research found that the tourism potential and safety perception of “La Perla” is acceptable among international tourists. However, for Puerto Ricans living in other sectors of the city the neighborhood has low tourist potential and a dangerous safety perception. This perception is damaging the incorporation of “La Perla” into the tourist engine of one of the most visited islands of the Caribbean.

Key Words: Slum tourism, slumming, informal settlement, security perception, security perception, tourism potential

Resumen:

El propósito de este artículo es explorar por qué el asentamiento informal de “La Perla” en San Juan, Puerto Rico nunca ha formado parte de las atracciones turísticas de la capital. A pesar de los valores culturales, turísticos y de la excelente localización, “La Perla” está aislada de San Juan y de los millones de turistas que visitan la isla cada año. Este artículo considera cómo la idea de turismo en barrios pobres, popular en algunos países en desarrollo, puede ser adaptada y aplicada de una manera sustentable “La Perla”. Esta investigación presenta como evidencia encuestas experimentales realizadas a residentes de Puerto Rico y turistas con la intención de entender el potencial turístico y la percepción de seguridad de La Perla. Esta investigación encontró que el potencial turístico y la percepción de seguridad son aceptables entre los visitantes internacionales. Sin embargo, para los habitantes de Puerto Rico que viven fuera de la Perla, el barrio no tiene un claro potencial turístico y es percibido como un sector de gran peligrosidad. Esa percepción hace difícil la incorporación de “La Perla” en el motor turístico de una de las islas más visitadas del Caribe.

Palabras clave: Turismo en barrios pobres, barriobajeros, asentamientos informales, percepción de seguridad, potencial turístico.

1. Introduction:

This paper aims to explore the reasons why a particular self-built and low-income neighborhood in San Juan Puerto Rico is not part of the tourism industry of the island. The idea is to explore the point of views of the inhabitants and tourist in San Juan in relation to safety perceptions and tourism potential. Tourism in disadvantaged communities is becoming a popular subject among researchers in recent years, this paper want to contribute to this debate. The originality of this empirical research is the consideration of the opinions of the actors involved in a specific neighborhood in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

1.1 “Slum tourism” or tourism in particular disadvantages communities:

Visiting disadvantages communities was a popular pastime more than a century ago in London. During the 1880’s, upper class inhabitants from the fashionable districts of London went on midnight tours of the slums of the East. The new word coined to describe these excursions was the term “slumming” which according to the Oxford Dictionary means: “spend time at a lower social level than one’s own through curiosity or for charitable purposes”. In 1894, an article of the New York Times declared: “A fashionable London mania reaches New York. Slumming parties to be the rage this winter” (Lee, 2009). This trend, originated from London and thereafter New York, is now common in some cities with informal settlements in countries such as South Africa, Brazil, India, and Kenya. Rolfes (2010), Cardozo and Pero (2003) Freire-Medeiros (2009), Meschkank (2011), Mowfort and Munt (2008), Lancaster (2007).

The name “slum tourism” is not the only name for this phenomenon, depending of the situation and the promoters it has been called “reality tourism”, “social tourism”, “favela tourism” and other names. Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Mumbai are among the cities were this phenomenon has been more exploited. In the case of those metropolises, the tourist agencies are the primary benefactors of the rapid expansion of this business, Frenzel and Koens, (2012), Meschkank, (2012). This kind of tourism can be considered unfair when is not helping the community. Referring to “slum tourism”, it is important to be sustainable and ethical, Lansing & De Vries, (2007).

1.2 Positives aspect of tourism in disadvantaged communities:

For some, tourism in disadvantaged communities is an unacceptable voyeurism, it has been criticized specially by some of the inhabitants of those communities Odede (2010). For

others, “slum tourism” involves transforming squalor, poverty and violence into a tourism product (Dürr & Jaffe, 2012). Some researchers believe there are positives aspects in “slum tourism” Steinbrink (2012), Obrien (2012), Basu (2012). The exchange can be positive but must advocate for a constructive transformation of the neighborhood, while preserving its roots and idiosyncratic aspects.

Apart of the incorporation of slums in the tourists’ agenda in determinate cities, the proximity to tourist areas can also help the transformation of disadvantaged communities into improved neighborhoods. There are examples around the world of how slums and dilapidated districts have been transformed into sustainable neighborhoods and tourist attractions. The rehabilitation of historic urban slums has become popular, especially in European cities. In some cases, the transformations have been positive (Doratli, 2005). The old district of Plaka in Athens was in very bad shape in the 70s; now it is not only a tourist attraction, but it is among the expensive areas of the city. The Olympic Games in Athens facilitated the transformation of many districts in the country (Maloutas, 2009). Motivated by the growth of tourism, the restoration of some historical cities in Cyprus have had mixed reviews (Akis, Peristianis, & Warner, 1996; Vehbi & Doratli, 2010). Examples of slum transformations in historical areas of Italy, France, Spain and Germany are numerous.

However, the rehabilitation of informal settlements into tourist areas is less popular in developing countries especially in Latin America. Among the reasons that explain this is the fact that many of the neighborhoods are relatively recent and usually there are few historical elements to be rescued for tourist attractions in comparison with Europe. Also, in developing countries, economical resources to promote tourism are reduced; informal neighborhoods need a change of image in order to diminish the negative safety perception of the travelers.

“Slum tourism” has several components; first, the socio-economical aspect; second, the physical aspect of the dwelling and the community; and third, the objective of this research: safety perceptions or risk perception. Safety perceptions can be different depending on the observer; either the inhabitant of the selected neighborhoods or any person from outside such as potential tourists and other inhabitants of the city.

Tourism is an excellent opportunity for selected developing countries slums to reach fair economic standards. According with the United Nations Habitat office, there are one billion people living in slums (Davis, 2006). It is obvious that incorporating some of them to the world

economy through tourism could help to improve the life of the settlements inhabitants. Unfortunately some informal settlements located near tourist attractions do not benefit from the prosperity of the tourism even if they are located near important sights or they have some type tourism potential. On the other side, some settlements are just not adequate, they are plagued with criminality and are not suitable to slum tourist visitors. The challenge is that some of the neighborhoods are safe, but there is a negative risk perception or safety perception that make challenging any tourist potential.

1.2 Safety perception and safety risk of tourism in disadvantaged communities

Nevertheless, some tourist are willing to visit countries were security risk is higher than in their home country (Korstanje & Clayton, 2012). The City of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil has a dangerous reputation and still received about 1 million international tourists in 2011. About 6000 people, almost all of them foreigners, visit every month the slum of Rocinha, which is one of hundreds of Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Favela-tour (2012). Rocinha, has organized tour companies. The visit with an organized tour is considered a safe experience in Rio de Janeiro. San Juan, Puerto Rico in the other hand receives more than 3 million international tourists a year and yet very few visit La Perla. The question is why very few tourists visit La Perla, even though the neighborhood is in a perfect location right next to the city's main attractions. This paper will like to explore the safety perception and the tourism potential of La Perla not from an academic point of view, but form the opinions and points of view of the inhabitants of the neighborhood, the inhabitants in San Juan and the tourists.

2. Case Study: La Perla

La Perla is an informal settlement of San Juan, Puerto Rico The term *informal settlement* usually refers to a piece of land that is invaded by settlers who build shacks without an urban plan or building permits. In this research “La Perla” will be called informal settlement instead of disadvantage community because is a better description of this particular neighborhood.

“La Perla” origin is related with the urban planning of the city during the Spanish colonial time. Puerto Rico became an important trading center during the colonial era because is located within a hilly inlet, adjacent to a bay with a natural deep-water port all of which is surrounded by the sea. The hilly topography of the inlet is suitable for military purposes of

surveillance of the commercial activities of the conquerors. Two massive military fortresses, San Felipe and San Cristóbal Castles, along with several kilometers of ramparts were built by the Spaniards to protect the city from pirate attacks. During colonial times, the Spanish “Laws of the Indies” controlled, among many other things, the urban design of the new Spanish cities in America and the Philippines. The laws established that the city cemetery, the slaughter-houses, and the humble dwellings or shacks must be located outside the city limits, in the case of San Juan outside the city walls. In San Juan, the area selected for those “insalubrious” urban components was a long stretch of land between the North city ramparts and the ocean.(Fig. 1) About 100 years ago, some low-income inhabitants occupied that stretch of land and built an informal settlement called “La Perla” around the slaughterhouse. Over time, the shacks were transformed into dwellings, services were incorporated, but the lack of initial planning makes this settlement to be considered informal even after considerable improvements.



Fig.1. The informal area of “La Perla” is on the right and the colonial city on the left. The city ramparts and the change of topography separate the two communities.(Photo: Sanders)

Nowadays, Puerto Rico is one of the most visited islands of the Caribbean. Its main attraction is the colonial area of Old San Juan, a walled city boasting two impressive Spanish forts. The Puerto Rican government promotes the country for tourism as “*La Isla del Encanto*” (the Island of Enchantment). The campaign is successful, evidenced by the fact that the island draws more than 3 million tourists every year. The colonial city of San Juan, a UNESCO World Heritage

Site, with its architectural marvels is the cultural complement of the beaches and exotic vegetation used as publicity to attract tourists to Puerto Rico. The tropical paradise concept, however, is only one side of Puerto Rico. The territory is “stuck” in a “free association” with the United States, but Puerto Rico still a developing “country” despite its relative high income per inhabitant. For many Puerto Ricans the island is the backyard of the U.S.A. Some informal settlements or slums in Puerto Rico are plagued with urban problems and social issues more typical of low-income countries. “La Perla” is one of those settlements. Nevertheless, even in those communities tourism can exist. This research will try to demonstrate how the safety perception of “La Perla” as a dangerous district is preventing its tourism potential. The settlement has all the necessary elements to become a tourist area as follows:

2.1 Location:

The same defensive colonial ramparts that separated San Juan from the pirates in colonial times, now separate the Puerto Rican capital from the informal settlement “La Perla” the neighborhood is located between the ocean and the formal city. Fig. 2 shows an aerial view of the area. The city ramparts and some green areas are between the two neighborhoods. A very positive aspect of “La Perla” is its location on perhaps the best plot of land in the capital. To the north side is the ocean, with the only short sand beaches of the old city.



Fig 2. Aerial view of ‘La Perla’ in the top area and its contrast between the formal city in the bottom area. (Photo Google maps)

2.2 “La Perla one million dollars views”:

The inclined topography of the land allows impressive views. At one end of the 600-meter-long stretch of land the “Castillo San Cristobal” fortress stands, at the opposite end an attractive colonial cemetery lies alongside a second fortress called “Castillo San Felipe”, one of the largest colonial Spanish military constructions in the Americas. Finally, the south side of “La Perla” is adjacent to the impressive walls of the old city of San Juan and its millions of tourists. It is obvious that the views and location of “La Perla” is ideal for tourism development and that people would not expect to find a slum there. Fig. 3 shows the ocean view of the neighborhood.



Fig. 3. View from the Colonial wall to ‘La Perla’ Note that even the roof tops are used as a canvas in this artistic community. (Photo: Sanders)

2.3 Vernacular Architecture

La Perla” displays many signs of urban decay despite its being located in one of the most valuable pieces of land in the city. However, the area has an intrinsic beauty in its vernacular architecture, use of colors and unplanned character. There is the potential to transform “La Perla” into a contemporary tourist area. The colorful neighborhood could be the perfect complement to the historical buildings of Old San Juan. The images of San Juan Colonial area and “La Perla”

seems to be very different; the grandeur and stateliness of the restored colonial buildings of San Juan cannot be easily compared with the informality of “La Perla”. However, between these two different worlds, there are many similarities. A comparison of the images of the two sections can reveal resemblances. (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. View of Old San Juan and its colonial buildings. (Photo: Sanders)



Fig. 5. View of “La Perla” informal neighborhood and self-built dwellings (Photo: Sanders)

2.4 Bulldozing of la Perla:

The future of “La Perla” as an informal community is menaced by economic and political forces due its special location. In 2011, a drug raid organized by the American agency DEA, resulted in the detention of about 100 inhabitants of “La Perla”, many of whom were prohibited from entering the neighborhood even after they were found innocent. Many of the inhabitants expressed during the judicial process their suspicion that the city government wanted to depopulate “La Perla” in order to bulldoze the neighborhood and re-develop an luxury community with hotels and expensive residences. A development plan has been presented by the government called San Juan Walkable City that proposes the extension of the beaches and a pedestrian boulevard along the waterfront of “La Perla”. It is not clear yet how this plan will preserve the neighborhood and the site plan of the project do not show the actual urban composition of the sector. Because most “La Perla” inhabitants have been established in the neighborhood for several generations, any change in the neighborhood needs to include the opinions and decisions of its inhabitants. One of the neighborhood peculiarities is the presence of the only beaches in the whole colonial city area., Even though the beaches are mostly rocky, as presented in Fig 6, there are some few stretch’s with sandy areas which are an unique commodity in the most touristic area of San Juan.



Fig. 6. Partial view of La Perla waterfront and beach. (Photo: Sanders)

3. Methodology

This paper describes a limited part of a large research project in the neighborhood of “La Perla ” (Caldieron, 2009). For this research three different surveys were planned. The first was conducted to a group of 50 inhabitants of La Perla. Because of the lack of data on the shantytown, the original survey included complete demographic and socio-cultural questions of the settlers and those dwellings, also, thousands of photographs were analyzed. The help of the community leaders of the neighborhood was fundamental to receiving collaboration from the inhabitants and community leaders. The surveys were written in Spanish, they were presented to the main householder of each dwelling. The surveys were written in Spanish, they were presented to the householders who were asked to answer the questions by themselves. Surveys were collected after few minutes. In the case of householders of advanced age, unable to read (for lack of reading glasses or formal education) the interviewer read the questions and wrote the householder’s responses. The author, with the help of students and teacher assistants, conducted the surveys between September 2012 and May 2013.

The second survey for this research conducted to American architecture students visiting La Perla. Since the spring of 2007, two or three times per year, students of various architectural

design courses of Florida Atlantic University have been engaged in the community of “La Perla”, designing real or hypothetical architectural projects in the area. For American students, this design experience is a great opportunity to be in contact with the social reality and the contemporary vernacular architecture of an informal neighborhood. Students conducting the research project did not look at the neighborhood residents as a curious audience, but as participants in an improvement process. Puerto Rico is a “Free Associated Territory” of the United States, but culturally is very different. From a didactical point of view, a field trip to Puerto Rico is a similar experience of being foreigner in a developing country and “La Perla” is similar to many other informal settlements in Latin America. The results of the student surveys here are only related to a question about changes in the safety perception of La Perla. Finally the author conducted a short third survey in May 2013. Participants in the survey were tourist and people working in the area near the cruise port of San Juan. The volunteers were asked few questions about safety and tourism in La Perla after looking a portfolio with 20 professional images of the neighborhood. Volunteers were asked after looking the portfolio of photos of la Perla is they believe the neighborhoods has potential to become a tourist area

4. Results

For this study, only few questions of the surveys were analyzed, some of the findings can provide information about the impression the inhabitants have of their neighborhood. This is an empirical research that will need to be widened in the future. Until recently, the police force of San Juan was not present in “La Perla”, therefore reliable data about criminal activities in the area does not exist. Independent of the crime rate of “La Perla”, which seems to be very low, the purpose of this study is to understand the opinions of the inhabitants of the neighborhood, International students visiting the neighborhood and inhabitants of Puerto Rico who live outside the neighborhood.

4.1 Finding: “La Perla” is very safe according with the neighborhood inhabitants:

Table 1 shows the opinion of 50 householders in “La Perla” concerning their opinions about the safety of the neighborhood. Most of the inhabitants considered the neighborhood to be very safe. Some of them, specially elderly residents even overlooked the well-known drug traffic that used to involve the neighborhood until 2011, stating that “La Perla” has always been a paradise there

is no problems here. Without a doubt,” La Perla” inhabitants feel their neighborhood is safe and some of them even commented that it is safer for visitors than in the rest of the city.

Table 1. Householders opinions about safety in “La Perla”.

Speaking about criminality, How safe for your family and for visitors is “La Perla”?	Very safe	Safe	Average	Unsafe
Percentage of Householders	94	4	2	0

(Data: Author’s survey, 2012)

4.2 Finding: “La Perla” is safe according to the International Students.

As previously explained, a total of 50 students participating in a design studio of the Architectural Department of the Florida Atlantic University in 2010 were surveyed. The three different groups of students who were involved in projects in “La Perla” were asked about their safety perception of the neighborhood. The question: “How safe do you feel in this neighborhood?” was asked three times; first time before their initial visit to the area, second time after the initial visit and the third time after the subsequent visit. During the visits students along with the professor walked throughout the neighborhood, met with some of the people living in the area and took photographs as part of a site analysis of three plots of land in which they were to design projects for the community. Table 3 reflects the results. The student’s perception of safety changed especially after the initial visit. The neighborhood was perceived as unsafe by almost half of the students prior to the initial visit but the second time the question was posed only 10% had a negative perception.

Table 2. International Students opinion about safety in “La Perla”

How safe do you feel La Perla neighborhood is?	Very safe	Safe	Average	Unsafe	Do not know
% of Students before visiting la Perla	5	15	10	35	25
% of Students after visiting La Perla for the first time	15	35	20	20	10
% of Students after visiting La Perla for the second time	25	45	20	10	0

(Data: Author’s surveys, 2011-2012)

4.3 Finding: Safety perception of “La Perla” for the general public depends on safety pre-conceptions.

For the administration of this short survey, employees of nearby stores or inhabitants of Puerto Rico were chosen in the same proportion as foreign tourists. The fifty volunteers were presented with a portfolio of twenty photographs of “La Perla” taken by the photographer collaborating in this research. They were first asked if they were able to identify the name of the neighborhood where the photos were taken. Thereafter, they were asked if the neighborhood has the potential to become a tourist destination. Results are represented in Table 3. Looking at the photographer’s portfolio, 70% of the people who were able to identify that the photographs were taken in “La Perla” believe the neighborhood is unsafe. The number is less than 30% among the people, mostly foreign tourists, who were not aware of where the photographs were shot. “La Perla” has a bad safety reputation among Puerto Rican inhabitants.

Table 3. General public opinion about safety of “La Perla”

How safe do you feel the neighborhood of this photography’s is?	Very safe	Safe	Average	Unsafe	Do not know N/A
People able to identify that the photos were taken in La Perla	0	10	10	70	10
People not aware where the photos were taken (mostly tourists)	5	20	10	30	20

(Data: Author’s surveys, 2011-2012)

4.4 Finding: “La Perla” possesses a very high potential towards becoming a tourist destination, according to its inhabitants.

Not surprisingly, the neighbors of “La Perla” always take a positive view of their community. When inhabitants of the neighborhood were asked if they believe if “La Perla” has the potential to become a tourist attraction of San Juan, 94% believe it has a very high tourism potential (Table 4). They expressed that the location of the neighborhood is one of the main advantages. About 30% of the neighbors stated that “La Perla” is a beautiful place. The name of the neighborhood association is called “La Perla Bella” (Beautiful “La Perla”). It is obvious that despite the lack of maintenance, relative poverty, and informality, there is an aesthetical value and the neighborhood is proud of itself. The several musical groups original formed in “La Perla” that are popular in the

island, and the artistic endeavors of its inhabitants are also part of the tourist potential of the neighborhood.

Table 4. Tourist potential of “La Perla” according to its inhabitants.

Do you believe “La Perla” has the potential to become a tourist area?	Very high potential	High potential	Average potential	Low potential
Percentage of Householders	94	4	2	0

Why you believe “La Perla” has the potential to become a tourist area?	Because of location	Because of its beauty	Because of arts/ music	Others
Percentage of Householders (Multiple answers)	46	30	28	82

(Data: Author’s survey, 2012)

4.5 Finding: La Perla is potential to become a tourist area depends of the public perception

Volunteers were asked after looking the portfolio of photos of “La Perla” if they believe the neighborhoods has potential to become a tourist area. The results of this survey are appalling. The 86% of the people who were unable to identify the location in the photos answered that they believed the area has a very high tourist potential and 14% believed the area has a high tourist potential. Nobody believed the place had a low tourist potential. In the case of the people able to identify that the photos were from “La Perla”, and obviously aware of the adverse reputation of the neighborhood, results were completely different. Only 32% believe “La Perla” has a very high potential to become a tourist area while 20% believe that the tourist potential is low. (Table 5)

Table 5. Tourist potential of La Perla according to people outside “La Perla”.

Do you believe the neighborhood of the above photos has the potential to become a tourist area?	Very high potential	High Potential	Average potential	Low Potential
People able to identify that the photos were taken in La Perla	32	38	10	20
People not aware were the photos were taken	76	14	10	2

(Data: Author’s survey, 2012)

4.6 Discussion:

Unfortunately, “La Perla” has a very bad reputation among the rest of the inhabitants of San Juan, who in general will never enter the neighborhood. Tourist guidebooks recommend that visitors abstain from entering the area. However, according to the experience of the people involved in this research, people of “La Perla” welcome all visitors. New arrivals moving to La Perla also appreciate the neighborhood. One lady expressed:

“ ... I am a foreigner that used to live in a condo in a costly beach area. When the rent became more expensive and my roommate moved out, I decided to rent a house in “La Perla”. I still live in front of the ocean but rent is a third [of what it was] in San Juan. Neighbors here are like family; they make sure everybody is safe here... I am very happy here.”

The image of “La Perla” as an unsafe area was partially justified in the past because of the illegal drug trade. “La Perla” can be compared with Christiania in Copenhagen. This “free area” is supposedly the largest and longest established squatter settlement in Europe (Hansen 2010). Christiania is a special area inhabited by individuals who believe cannabis should be legal and who are looking for an alternative lifestyle. The neighborhood has managed to be relatively independent of the control of the authorities of Copenhagen. Christiania is one of the most visited attractions of Copenhagen. “La Perla”, however, is not an alternative community. After the 2011 drug crackdown, the sector has a permanent police presence and has become much more open to the public“. La Perla” seems to be safer than some of the other neighborhoods of San Juan. After the drug crackdown, many dwellings in “La Perla” have been abandoned, contributing to the image of decay, as do the occupied structures in bad condition. But urban decay can be also perceived as attractive to some tourists. Figures 5 show a photograph of “La Perla”, proving there is beauty to be found in decadent areas and abandoned homes.



Fig. 5. In the center, view of an abandoned house in La Perla, only the facade is standing.

The inhabitants of the formal side of San Juan usually do not visit “La Perla”. The neighborhood is socially segregated from the city of San Juan, and the colonial wall act as a divide between the formal city and the informal settlement. Contemporary walls are used to divide communities in many cities in Latin America, such as Sao Paulo segregating communities, do-Rio-Caldeira, (2000). Until a few years ago, an extraordinary event united the two communities of San Juan. The city used to celebrate a cultural event known as the “Tuesday Night Galleries”. Because “La Perla” has an artistic reputation, many young people from all the economic sectors of San Juan visited the neighborhood to attend the monthly party. The art event was celebrated in the arts galleries of San Juan, in “La Perla” it was a possibility to hold concerts of popular groups and unfortunately and excuse to consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs. However, the event was the only time when residents from the two sides of the city mingled together. Well-dressed and affluent young Puerto Ricans visited the “infamous slum” late at night sharing with “La Perla” inhabitants like a big family party. The “Tuesday Night Gallery” events were finally suspended by the authorities. The city government must find a way to control illegal activities in La Perla while allowing for wholesome parties and concerts; these offer good possibilities towards integrating the two sides of the divided society.

As expressed by “La Perla” inhabitants in the survey, the neighborhood is famous because of its musical and artistic image. Several important musicians in Puerto Rico are from the neighborhood. The concerts staged in “La Perla” are very popular and the inhabitants artistic blood is reflected all around in murals expressing a passion for painting. Tourists could very well appreciate the colorful houses, and the artistic murals that cover every type of surface around the neighborhood. In the neighborhood homes and business facades and any other available surface are decorated with artworks. Fig.6 and 7.



Fig. 6.A decorated skating track in La Perla. Frequently, also serves as a community pool. Every few months our visits to “La Perla” reveals a changing neighborhood. There are always new murals, new paintings or a house that whose color has been changed. The colorful graffiti’s in “La Perla” are not acts of random illegal activity. Artists are organized and in many instances kids have the possibility to participate in the creation of the artworks. The pedestrian paths are an invitation to discover a neighborhood with interesting public and semi-public areas. (Fig 7) Finally the “renaissance” of La Perla as a tourist neighborhood start to appear in restaurants and a couple of bars, places sometimes frequented by tourists.(Fig 8)



Fig. 7. La Perla is an unplanned neighborhood with strong aesthetical values.
(Photo:Sanders)



Fig. 8. Interior of a bar in “La Perla” (Photo: Sanders)

5. Conclusions:

Slumming is a controversial form of tourism; it can be considered superfluous and in some situations, a social exploitation of a sad reality. A slum resident in Nairobi expressed a

phrase similar to comments in use by other individuals living in slums: “Slum tourism is a one-way street: they get photos; we lose a piece of our dignity”, (Okede, 2010). Notwithstanding, tourism in informal settlements can have positive effects when it is proposed according to ethical and sustainable principles. What it is not, is about bringing a group of tourist to look at poverty for few minutes and take photographs; it is about adapting the community to the needs of the tourist, creating new jobs and business ventures in the settlement. The resources of the visitors could help to transform the neighbourhood from a slum to an area with growing business, small eateries and other services that could benefit the residents directly. This research opens a door to understand the potential tourism concept and the safety perception according with the user’s point of view, not only by the academics point of view. Some informal settlements can be considered to have strong tourism potential because are aesthetically successful, many have strong cultural values and, if the location is adequate, in certain cases they can be part of the tourism economy. This desire is challenging in some places due to the evident criminality, especially in some Latin America cities. Informal neighborhoods are not always safe. Unfortunately, even in the cities where informal settlements are safe, they may be perceived as dangerous by outsiders. Many tourists presume that every slum, in developing countries, is dangerous which an invalid perception is. As presented in this research, the Puerto Rican inhabitants living outside “La Perla” reinforce the misconception that the neighborhood is dangerous and unsafe thus causing most tourists to consider the area off limits.

In the case of “La Perla”, because of its location, artistic presence and its particular architecture, there is a clear potential to develop the neighbourhood into a tourist attraction. All this could, hopefully, be accomplished without losing the idiosyncrasy and cultural values of its inhabitants. The surveys show that “La Perla” inhabitants clearly believe in the tourist potential of the neighborhood. International students and foreigner tourists in San Juan also share the same opinion. The Puerto Rican inhabitants who do not live in “La Perla” and who participated in this survey, however, believe that the area has a much lower tourist potential and is unsafe in comparison with the other groups who answered the questionnaire. The negative perception concerning safety in “La Perla” runs very deep among most Puerto Ricans and possibly among people associate with tourism on the island. If most Puerto Ricans believe that La Perla is a dangerous place, tourist organizations and travel agencies will discourage any visits to the

informal settlements. Unfortunately, they transmit this perception to the international tourist who depending of their risk perception; will be more inclined to favor a visit to informal settlers. This research will continue, more data is necessary to understand all the variables of the case. The future of La Perlais uncertain, economical interests menaces the community. Nonetheless, the neighborhood has been going through some apparent changes for the better. Hopefully, “La Perla” will be preserved as an integral part of the city in addition to being promoted as a fundamental element among the tourist attractions of the colonial district.

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