

The Story of Virgin Islands Built Heritage

Like the exposed brick wall of the Old Barracks, Virgin Islands history is as layered and textured and complex as old yellow and redbrick and old coral and limestone. It is held together by old and new plaster, and the sweat and tears of ancestors, binding the past, the present, and the future into solid form. Let's begin with the story of Virgin Islands built heritage. The Virgin Islands is said to have a unique architectural building style. How did this unique style develop? While the buildings in the four Virgin Islands towns were based on the designs of European towns and planned by Danish architects, the enslaved West African craftsmen who did the iron, wood, stone, and other work in the towns and on the plantations used the knowledge and craftsmanship that they learned from their own cultures to create buildings that were unique to the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean. They innovated and adapted to the Caribbean environment using a combination of knowledge and craftsmanship from Europe, Africa and indigenous Caribbean people, to create the architectural and built heritage that is unique to the Virgin Islands and to the Caribbean. According to Danish architect/historian Ulla Lunn, enslaved artisans learned the European building trades from the Danish West India Company and the Moravian Brethren. There were only a few European artisans in the colony so most of the builders were free and enslaved people of color who came with their own understanding of construction in a tropical environment. The artisans and craftsmen took European style architecture and building culture and developed their own architectural expression. They built for shade, coolness, resistance to hurricanes and created a coherent architectural style unique to the Virgin Islands. In her book, "When Architecture Tells the Story," Lunn writes: "The architecture on the island is unique because of its beauty and rarity and the number of existing buildings by which it is represented. It is unique because it constitutes a collective story of the colonial period and the people who were enslaved. Nowhere else in the Caribbean or Central America is this story told on such a grand scale."

Materials Used

Danish architecture students studying the Old Barracks in 2016 reported in their Field Study that its walls are made of yellow and red Flensburg brick brought from Denmark as ballast for ships sailing to the Caribbean, and from local St. Croix sources such as coral and limestone. The walls were remodeled in modern times with cement and other plaster mixes. They also report that the building at 21 Hospital Street features a cross hipped roof structure. Lunn writes that the large red bricks “came from buildings torn down in Flensbourg and Copenhagen, the Danish ports from which most ships came to the Virgin Islands,” known in the colonial period as the Danish West Indies. The smaller yellow bricks, also from Flensburg are porous, and are “plastered and whitewashed to tolerate the harsh weather in the Caribbean.” Lunn writes that St. Croix’s large deposit of limestone, which are formed by coral, and coral stone were used because they “withstand structural loads and the fissures in the coral cause them to absorb moisture from the ground.” This moisture she writes “helps to cool houses,” and is a “special way of building used in the tropics.” Coral stone, she continues, chipped and sawed to specific shapes,” were an “excellent building material for setting corners and windows precisely.” Lunn also speaks of the importance of building lime, made from beach shells and corals, and used to plaster and whitewash buildings. Limewash, she says is a disinfectant, and traditionally, was used in the Virgin Islands in sugar production and to eliminate algae and vermin in the sugar factory. It was also used by the enslaved to disinfect their living quarters and whitewash walls after hurricane season to eliminate algae and plants. Limewash was also the source of the Virgin Islands pastel color palette. Mixed with available earth colors, whitewash produces the light rose and light-yellow colors found in Virgin Islands buildings. Lunn says that whether large or small “buildings in the Danish West Indies were consistently built with hipped roofs,” because it is “safest in hurricanes, as high winds slide off it.” Other traditional Virgin Islands building features adapted for cooling and for resistance to hurricane damage are “open areas over the doors and under the roof,” which lets the wind through, countering built up pressure and avoiding a blown off roof.

The Artisans

In his article, "Getting It Straight: The Contributions of Africans to the Establishment of Christiansted," St. Croix historian George Tyson writes: "Christiansted, from the outset has been not a Danish town, but an African-Danish town, not only because Africans and people of African descent employed their skills in its creation, but also because they populated it, transformed it, exploited its potential for survival in the face of most egregious oppression, and used it to create distinctive familial, cultural and community traditions." Quoting the Moravian missionary Oldendorp who wrote an extensive report about mid-18th century St. Croix, Tyson writes that enslaved artisans "make up at least 1/10th of the population." They were the craftsmen who "enjoyed greater privileges and better conditions than other enslaved individuals...were allowed to work their provision grounds on both Saturday and Sunday and were given several free days during major holiday periods and are allowed as much time for rest as free craftsmen are accustomed to have." Lunn writes that "individual enslaved artisans were strongly motivated to do a good job, for one of the few ways out of slavery was to work and earn a little extra money so that one could save up a sufficient amount to purchase one's own freedom." One such enslaved St. Croix craftsman was Mingo David, who ran the school for artisans and craftsmen located at Estate Princesse, and who was able to free his family by his efforts. As a stone mason, he worked on Fort Christiansvaern, Estate Princesse and Estate LaGrange. Lunn writes that because of his work as a foreman mason and teacher; he deserves a large part of the credit for the high quality of the masonry in the old town buildings and the staircase system at Fort Christiansvaern. Tyson writes that he was also a gifted orator, preacher and member of the Moravian Church who built meeting houses in both Christiansted and Frederiksted. Tyson writes that "Africans and Creoles of African descent were primarily responsible for building the town of Christiansted during Denmark's Golden Age." He states that Danish "aspirations, building codes, aesthetics, design and investment capital...played a part" but the architectural structures that have stood the test of centuries needed "the skills, energy and talent of African tradesmen." They were responsible not only for the construction of the major buildings such as the Barracks, the Fort, Government House and merchant buildings along King and Company Street, but also the dwellings in the neighborhoods where they lived such as Free

Gut, Water Gut and Gallows Bay. Tyson writes, “they helped elaborate, primarily in the form of small, residential houses, a distinctive Caribbean vernacular style...shown to be rooted in African design and building traditions.” St. Croix historian Karen Thurland in her book “Tradesmen of St. Croix,” writes that the artisan and craft traditions that began in the 1700s were alive on St. Croix into the 1960s and disappeared after they could no longer meet the demands of a growing population or compete with the importation of goods from the rest of the world. “Tradesmen were a vital part of the islands’ economic activities,” she writes. “Tradesmen passed down their techniques and knowledge to their children. These men took an active role in their respective churches, served on civic and religious committees and made financial contributions to these institutions. They gave positive guidance to island youngsters and served as role models for many young men.”