

## Preservation in the Virgin Islands: Problems in Translating Cultural Values

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I. The Problem of Preservation in a "Non-Traditional" Context:  
Preservationists are often so certain of their own aims that they forget those aims are not universally embraced. Many parts of the world, especially former colonial countries, have difficulty accepting the principles and standards set out in international preservation agreements. The problem, really, is one of establishing popular support for what many would call elitist values. As a case study, I would like to look at the U.S. Virgin Islands, where I worked on a federal grant for five years, from 1979-84, and continue to act in an informal advisory capacity.

### II. The Virgin Islands and Virgin Islands Culture:

The U.S. Virgin Islands are located along the northern edge of the Eastern Antilles, approximately 60 miles east of Puerto Rico and 1100 miles southeast of Florida. For much of their history the Virgin Islands were a Danish possession. St. Thomas was acquired in 1671, nearby St. John occupied in 1716 and St. Croix, the largest of the group, was bought from the French in 1734.<sup>1</sup> All three islands were devoted to sugar production during the 18th and 19th centuries; St. Thomas also became an important port and coaling station. With the exception of two short periods of occupancy by the British, the island remained Danish until 1917, when they were purchased by the United States to serve as a naval station and supply base. They were administered first by the Navy and after 1931 by the Interior Department. In 1953, legislation was revised to allow for a popularly elected legislature, and in 1970 the Virgin Islands elected its own governor. The islands are now self-governing in most matters relating to internal affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The present economy of the islands is based on tourism, manufacturing and related service industries.<sup>3</sup> A large percentage of the population is also employed by the local government, which in turn is subsidized by U.S. governmental grants and programs. The sugar industry itself ended in the 1960's, although some rum is still distilled on the island of St. Croix. Refining and ore processing, while promising a new economic base in the early 1960's, have not lived up to expectations and have now nearly stopped operations.

The population of the islands, which at present totals approximately 100,000, is comprised of a mixture of "native" Virgin Islanders, mostly of African descent, and smaller segments of people of Hispanic background (mostly Puerto Rican) and "down islanders", or more recent immigrants from other Caribbean islands.<sup>4</sup> There is also a small French-speaking population on St. Thomas, which came from St. Barts in the mid-19th century, an older Jewish community, with Sephardic roots, a recent Palestinian group and a significant number of more recent U.S. and European immigrants, both black and white, known as "continentals".

The "culture" of the Virgin Islands is not easily defined. For most Virgin Islanders "culture" means "native" culture, although many of the cultural traits of Virgin Islands natives are shared by other immigrant groups as well. The main cultural markers are language, dress, foods, music, ways of entertaining, names, and various behavioral traditions.<sup>5</sup> As in other countries, "culture" is always subject to redefinition, and a number of new "traditions", mostly based on African and other Caribbean practices, have entered into Virgin Islands culture over the course of recent years. Reggae, for example, is now considered part of Virgin Islands culture as are "jumbi"- (stilt) dancers, a popular feature of Virgin Islands carnivals and other cultural gatherings. Historic buildings and other cultural sites play little part in Virgin Islands culture as it is now. This, of course, has had an important effect on historic preservation programs in the islands.

### III. Virgin Islands' Historic Resources and Historic Preservation Programs:

The Virgin Islands has an unusually rich collection of historic buildings and other cultural resources. The earliest buildings date to the period of Danish colonization during the 17th century, with the majority of historic buildings dating from the mid to late 19th century. There are also a large -- and as yet only partially cataloged -- number of Pre-Columbian archaeological sites.<sup>6</sup> Historic buildings are concentrated in three towns: Charlotte Amalie, in St. Thomas; Christiansted and Frederiksted, in St. Croix. There are also a number of historic buildings, mostly early 20th-century vernacular structures, in Cruz Bay, St. John. Present inventories suggest that there are about 3000 historic urban structures in the islands.<sup>7</sup> Other historic buildings, many vestiges of the sugar industry, are scattered over the countryside. St. John possesses approximately 60 ruins of 18th century sugar plantations; St. Thomas approximately 10; St. Croix, over 100, still-recognizable plantation complexes, mostly in ruins. There are also large numbers of simple wood and masonry cottages, sometimes associated with plantations but often the result of later homesteading programs; a number of rural historic churches; and a few significant navy buildings dating through the 1940's.

Historic preservation efforts in the Virgin Islands began in the 1950's, largely as a result of National Park Service initiatives. The Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956, encompassing a number of historic plantation ruins and Pre-Columbian archaeological sites.<sup>8</sup> In 1951, a separate National Historic Site was established in Christiansted, centering on the colonial architecture of the town. Principal buildings in the site included the fort, dating to 1750, the Lutheran Church, the customs and scale houses as well as a 19th-century government building.<sup>9</sup> In 1951, a special Historic District was established in Christiansted to reinforce National Park Service efforts, a process followed in 1968 for the larger town of Charlotte Amalie as well.<sup>10</sup>

Preservation activities in the islands remained the responsibility of the National Park Service, and to a lesser extent the local government, until the mid 1970's. In 1976, the Virgin Islands received Bicentennial funds for the restoration of the fort in Frederiksted. The same year, through the advice of the consulting firm of Hartzog, Lader and Richards, the islands took advantage of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, and established a separate state program.<sup>11</sup> Initial work entailed completion of inventories for the three historic towns, along with separate

nominations for British and Danish fortifications and for several churches and sugar estates. A number of preservation projects, including the restoration of a British military quarters, the preparation of a historic structure report on Charlotte Amalie's 17th and 18th century Fort Christian,<sup>12</sup> and several small private projects were also funded during that period. Review of a number of other federally-funded projects involving historic buildings were undertaken by the consulting firm and the locally appointed State Historic Preservation Officer, Thomas Blake, and a small local staff. In 1978 Claudette Lewis, the present State Historic Preservation Officer, joined the staff, and I started as the first professionally-trained staff member under the federal program the following year.

Unfortunately for the reception of the program, the federal historic preservation program became active in the Virgin Islands at a time when other governmental programs were being reduced. The Virgin Islands has long depended upon U.S. subsidies for its support. Urban renewal, housing programs, educational and health programs, agricultural extension programs, etc, have all had a great impact on the economic life of the islands. Throughout the 1970's, expectations had risen to a high point, and many hoped, unrealistically, that historic preservation would substitute for declining funds in other areas, especially decreases in money for housing and urban renewal. Preservation grant monies, however, were small compared to large HUD-funded programs. During peak years, between 1980 and 1982, amounts for actual restoration or rehabilitation projects never totaled over \$300,000.<sup>13</sup> Much of that was in turn directed to local governmental projects.

#### IV. Problems in Translating Preservation Values:

The idea of historic preservation has been slow to gain acceptance in the Virgin Islands. Most initiative has been taken by "outsiders" attracted to the historic resources of the Virgin Islands. The Danish West Indian Society has regularly sponsored visits by members, many with colonial connections to the islands, focusing on historic buildings and sites. In 1960 a group of students from the Danish Royal Academy undertook a detailed study of a number of historic buildings in all three towns, as well as a number of rural properties.<sup>14</sup> There have also been HABS and HAER teams in the islands, in 1960 and 1977; and the National Park Service, through the efforts of Historical Architect Frederik Gjessing, continued to carry out research and complete drawings of historic buildings.<sup>15</sup> Membership organizations, mostly subscribed to by "continentals", were formed on St. Thomas and St. Croix in the 1960's and a separate historical society was established in St. John more recently. Historic preservation concerns entered into a number of governmental efforts. But generally historic preservation has been seen as outside of and often opposed to local interests.

One reason for local scepticism is in part due to misconceptions about the origins of historic architecture in the islands. Historic buildings are viewed as "Danish", a legacy of the colonial era in Virgin Islands history. Interest shown by modern Danish groups and by white continentals reinforces this view that the 18th and 19th century buildings are not part of indigenous Virgin Islands culture.<sup>16</sup> Historic records suggest that most construction work was in fact carried out by black artisans, many acting as

independent contractors as early as the late 18th century. Also, few buildings were designed by Danish architects or engineers. Most remaining historic buildings, with the exception of a number of officially-designed governmental buildings, follow vernacular precedents and show the impact of local traditions and design as well as that of other European cultures in the islands. Still, this fact is little realized or explained in either educational or promotional materials on the islands.

The concept of something having value simply because of age is also little understood in the islands. As suggested, cultural markers in the Virgin Islands emphasize transient, repetitious acts and processes, not permanent structures. The environment of the Caribbean probably has had a part in determining this. As the large number of ruins attests, the Caribbean is particularly harsh for buildings. Hurricanes, termites, moisture problems and frequent economic shifts, sometimes coupled with disastrous natural events or politically-inspired protests -- a quarter of Frederiksted was burned in 1878 as the result of a labor uprising -- have all contributed to losses of buildings over the years. Levels of replacement are high and expected, both for whole buildings and for components, such as roofs, windows or sheathing. There is little respect for the idea of authenticity -- of original versus replacement materials. Similarly, the type of original material is not generally respected. Masonry, the most popular building material today, is commonly used to replace wood. Newer, over-hanging eaves replace earlier high pitched roofs. Modern mechanical windows replace earlier shutters and jalousies. None of those changes are seen as detracting from the "historic" character of a building.

The concept of "value" is similarly distorted in the Virgin Islands. Since the islands' historic architecture is seen as outside their culture, Virgin Islanders feel little sense of responsibility for historic buildings. "Value", then, tends to be translated into monetary terms only. As a result of educational programs, grants for restoration or repairs, tax incentives under federal laws, and the precedent set by Urban Renewal and other programs, many Virgin Islanders now view their buildings as negotiable commodities. Prices are raised to often unrealistic heights even in areas, such as Frederiksted, where buildings have in fact only minimal market value. The potential for housing, especially for younger members of the community willing to trade convenience for affordable buildings, has never been realized in the Virgin Islands. Continued hopes for sales keep prices high, while buildings are left vacant and continue to deteriorate. Many now suburban native Virgin Islanders, no longer, have a direct interest in their former residences and can afford to wait.

Another disincentive to the reuse of historic buildings is a lack of interest in construction-related craftsmanship. As in other countries, native handicrafts, including basketry, pottery and furniture making, are being lost in the Virgin Islands. There are few older Virgin Islands carpenters or masons, and much modern construction work is undertaken by "down islanders" or by "continentals." Unlike other countries, however, there is little interest in building crafts or restoration as a hobby. School shop programs concentrate on modern, "West Indian" furniture design. There are no programs for construction or contracting. Middle-class Virgin Islanders, largely for reasons of status, are reluctant to take on manual labor, such as building restoration. As a result there is no core of interested amateurs to make preservation work cost effective, as it has

become in much of the U.S. Rehabilitation remains an expensive process, undertaken by professionals only.

Another disincentive to preservation is the quality of buildings themselves. Most of the historic buildings in the Virgin Islands are small vernacular structures, often built of wood, and with usually only two or three small rooms. Masonry buildings are viewed as more valuable and possibly worthy of preservation, suggesting modern prejudices. Wooden buildings are seen as too deteriorated to restore. Differences in housing expectations have had a part in this decision as well. Modern Virgin Island families expect masonry buildings with living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and baths. Older wooden buildings are reminders of the islands' past poverty. Despite their obvious historic value - and their picturesque appeal for many outsiders - smaller wooden buildings would clearly not conform to present expectations.

A final problem with historic buildings for islanders is that they do not fit into their future view of what the islands should become. Many, though not all, Virgin Islanders are proponents of modernization. Economic growth, new housing, schools, technical training are seen as the means to improve the islands' social and financial problems. Historic buildings are seen as a burden to be supported, not as something that might contribute to the future. Also, historic buildings do not conform to what islanders have increasingly come to see as their own architecture -- a "West Indian" architecture based on overhanging roofs, exposed rubble veneer, and apparent "Spanish" or Puerto Rican influences, such as wrought iron and paved patios. The problem has been to find ways of making the historic buildings part of Virgin Islands culture, both past and future.

#### V. Past and Future Strategies:

Past strategies in the Virgin Islands for promoting preservation have been only partially unsuccessful. Appeals to "stewardship" for historic buildings and sites have failed because so few Virgin Islanders -- with some important exceptions -- view the historic architecture of the islands as their own. The emphasis on economic viability, which has proved so successful in the mainland U.S., has had less application on the islands, where preservation often costs far more than new building due to inexperienced contractors and expensive imported materials. Grant programs have been popular, but have not had wide impact due to the small amounts of money actually available. Several churches and other both private and public buildings received historic preservation matching grants, but there has been little influence on surrounding buildings or neighborhoods. The federal tax incentive program has had only a small effect, due to islander inexperience in dealing with lending organizations and undertaking large construction projects. Educational activities, in the form of workshops, publications and television broadcasts have had some benefit, although it is difficult to measure the results. Overall, more buildings have been lost in the past few years than have been saved, and there is little indication that trends are changing.

What hope is there then in the Virgin Islands? The problem is not an easy one nor will solutions be quick in coming. The major focus over the next few years should be on continued educational activities. School programs, published materials, workshops and television shows must all stress the connection of historic buildings to the traditional culture of the islands. Documented contributions by black, Virgin Islands craftsmen

must be emphasized. The "West Indian" contribution to house form and detailing should be understood. Promotional materials on the islands should stress the cultural as well as scenic beauty of the islands. Cultural tourism, a recent issue of Place: The Magazine of Livability points out, is a viable alternative for the Caribbean and one that has up to now been underrated.<sup>18</sup> Also, expressly "Virgin Islands" community organizations must be targeted for educational presentations. Church groups in particular are a hopeful audience as they are interested in the history of their congregations and often their churches. Finally, there is the need for further vocational training. New vocational schools in St. Croix and St. Thomas are ideally suited to provide training in building crafts no longer available on the islands. The effort, then, must take several lines of attack. The most important thing is that a foundation of appreciation and understanding be established in the islands. Preservation cannot always filter down from above but must become part of the culture and identity of the people themselves.

1 Waldemar Westergaard, The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671-1754 (New York: Macmillan, 1917).

2 Isaac Dookhan, A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States (Epping, Essex, England: Caribbean Universities Press, 1974).

3 U.S. Virgin Islands Economic Indicators, Office of Policy, Planning and Research, V.I. Dept. of Commerce, 1986.

4 U.S. Virgin Islands Growth Statistics, Office of Policy, Planning and Research, V.I. Dept. of Commerce, 1986.

5 For example, Project Introspection, European and African Influence on the Culture of the Virgin Islands, V.I. Dept. of Education, 1972.

6 Archaeology in the Virgin Islands, pamphlet, V.I. Division for Archaeology and Historic Preservation, 1981.

7 Virgin Islands Inventory of Historic and Archaeological Sites, Division for Archaeology and Historic Preservation, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.

8 The St. John National Park was established officially in 1956, incorporating the earlier NPS site in Christiansted.

9 Denver Service Center, Virgin Islands General Management Plan, National Park Service, 1983.

10 Virgin Islands Code, Title 29, Sub-section 280, Act 2258, 1968.

11 "National Preservation Act of 1966", Searching 1, 3 (Dec. 1977), 1.

12 DeJongh/Giessing, Architects and Planners, Fort Christian Historic Structures Report, V.I. Dept. of Conservation and Cultural Affairs, 1982.

13 "Funds for Preservation Cut", Searching NS 1, 1 (Winter, 1981), 1.

14 Ole Svenson, Three Towns: Conservation and Renewal of Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted and Frederiksted (Copenhagen: Danish Royal Academy, 196 1964).

15 Historic Architecture of the Virgin Islands: Selections from the Historic American Buildings Survey (Washington: National Park Service, 1966).

16 For example, Frederik Giessing, "An Architectural Heritage"; in Ernest Downing, ed. 50 years, St. Thomas Friends of Denmark Society, 1967.

17 The process is described in detail in Taylor, Giessing, et. al. Frederiksted Preservation, V.I. Planning Office, 1984.

18 Jeanne V. Beekhus, "Tourism Dollars and Caribbean Culture", Place: The Magazine of Livability Partners for Livable Places, Washington 6, 6 (Nov./Dec. 1987), 18-19.

## «La conservación histórica en las islas Vírgenes: problemas con la transferencia de valores culturales»

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### Resumen:

En este trabajo se exploran los problemas con establecer un programa de conservación histórica en un área donde no hay mucho interés en la conservación de edificios y zonas históricas. Aunque los principios y los valores de conservación, establecidos en acuerdos internacionales, expresan las esperanzas comunes de la comunidad mundial, se ven frecuentemente como mandatos elitistas. Los habitantes "nativos" de las islas Vírgenes, quienes forman un grupo cultural que consiste en un gran porcentaje de la población del archipiélago y que controla la mayor parte de las instituciones allí, generalmente no han demostrado interés en los esfuerzos hechos en el campo de la conservación histórica. En las islas Vírgenes, un territorio estadounidense, la conservación histórica ha sido principalmente de interés a "extranjeros", grupos o con vínculos con el pasado colonial o con los norteamericanos o europeos recién llegados. Esto ha tenido numerosas repercusiones negativas en cuanto a los esfuerzos de conservación histórica en las islas. Tradicionalmente, los isleños ponen más énfasis en el idioma, la ropa, la comida y las costumbres para definirse culturalmente que en los aspectos más tangibles. Se considera la arquitectura histórica un vestigio de la época colonial, una época que muchos isleños prefieren olvidar. También, se consideran los edificios objetos dispuestos a cambios y adaptaciones en vez de una riqueza histórica debido en parte a las fuertes condiciones climáticas y a la historia económica de las islas Vírgenes. Predominan las nuevas preferencias por los edificios de ladrillo, piedra u hormigón, y la preferencia dominante por la modernización también ha afectado las actitudes. Las estrategias comunes de la conservación histórica, incluyendo súplicas con relación a las responsabilidades culturales y un énfasis en las ventajas económicas de la conservación han tenido poco impacto en las islas. Dentro del contexto de las islas Vírgenes, se distorciona la referencia a "valor" para significar algo monetario, no un valor cultural. El fracaso de los programas de conservación histórica patrocinados por el gobierno federal para reemplazar proyectos de viviendas y renovación urbana también ha causado bastante desilusión. En este trabajo se hace hincapié en unas estrategias futuras que deberían concentrarse en la educación, tanto para entrenar a artesanos como para establecer una base popular de apoyo para la conservación histórica. También se recomienda un cambio de énfasis en la campaña de turismo para fomentar un turismo cultural.

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### Summary:

My paper discusses the problems of establishing a historic preservation program in an area where there is little traditional appreciation for historic buildings or sites. Preservation principles and values, set out in international agreements, express the common aspirations of the world community, but are often viewed as elitist dictates. "Native" Virgin Islanders, a cultural group constituting a large percentage of the Virgin Islands population and exercising control over most Virgin Islands institutions, have been generally unreceptive to historic preservation efforts. Preservation in the Virgin Islands, a U.S. territory, has largely been the prerogative of "outsiders", groups either with ties to the colonial past or more recently arrived North Americans and Europeans. This has had a number of negative repercussions for preservation efforts on the islands. Traditionally, Virgin Islanders emphasize cultural markers such as language, dress, foods, and habits, over more tangible aspects of culture in defining themselves. Historic architecture is seen as a remnant of the colonial era, which many Virgin Islanders prefer to forget. Also, buildings are seen less as treasured mementos than as objects subject to change and adaptation, due in part to harsh tropical conditions and the islands' economic history. Newer preferences for masonry buildings and the overriding preference for modernization over stewardship also affect island attitudes. The usual preservation strategies, including appeals to cultural responsibilities and emphasis on the economic advantages of preservation, have had little impact in the islands. Reference to "value" becomes distorted in the Virgin Islands context to suggest monetary, not cultural value. The failure of federally-sponsored historic preservation programs to replace urban-renewal and housing projects has also led to disappointment. Future strategies, the paper stresses, should concentrate on educational efforts, both to train artisans and to establish a foundation of popular support for preservation. Changes in the emphasis of tourism promotion to encourage cultural tourism are also suggested.