

# FOLK ARCHITECTURE

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**A** barely surviving example of folk architecture, the wattle and daub house had its origins in Africa and proliferated in the Virgin Islands countryside. It is strong and durable, and some of the structures have survived hurricanes. Variations on the wattle and daub theme also can be found in other parts of the Caribbean, South America, Asia and Europe. Several examples are still standing on the island of St. John.

Building materials for this house were taken from the natural forest and surrounding areas. Tropical hardwoods and tyre palm leaves were selected and cut at times that coincided with particular phases of the moon. Craftsmen say working with the moon ensured that wood and palm leaves would not be eaten by insects.

Supporting poles usually were cut to a length of about seven feet and placed into the ground several feet apart. Smaller branches were woven through these supporting poles in a pattern similar to basketwork. Fresh cow dung, clay or a mixture of sand, lime and water was used to plaster the exterior of the structure. Sometimes a white lime wash would be used on the exterior. Roofs were usually of the hip or gable type, covered with grass or palm leaves. Tyre palm seems to have been the more favored material.

Mrs. Alice Daniels, 96, recalling life on the western end of St. Thomas, tells of how the country people came together to assist one another in building homes. Most of the actual construction was done by men, while women gathered palm leaves and did other work. Women often prepared dishes of hearty food to make the event a festive one. There would also be singing of folk and religious songs, gossiping and storytelling.

The houses were used primarily for sleeping and household storage. Cooking and other chores were done in the surrounding yard, in which many families also maintained gardens and kept animals. This was a lifestyle typical of many Afro-Caribbean people.

Few Virgin Islanders today remember this type of house construction, but on St. John surviving examples of the wattle and daub house were in use up to recent times. Several families in the Coral Bay area have retained the houses, and other examples can be found on old plantations and estates on the island. One family patriarch, Mr. Winfield James, who was 92 years old

when interviewed, spoke of several structures he had built on St. John.

## FOLK COTTAGES

Wood frame West Indian houses are a folk form that can be found in a number of variations in the Virgin Islands. Houses of this type are visible throughout the three major towns — Charlotte Amalie, Christiansted and Fredriksted.

Charlotte Amalie is the oldest of the towns on St. Thomas. Many wooden structures can be found on the east and west sides of its commercial district. Within the areas defined by the structures are historic neighborhoods of working class citizens. The Savanne district is the oldest community on St. Thomas. Established in the mid 1700s for the large number of free Blacks in the then Danish West Indies, the area was also reserved for a large number of Sephardic Jews who came to the Caribbean to escape the Spanish Inquisition and other religious persecution.

Structures were built facing the street and were restricted by the size of their lots, which could be either purchased or leased. Many houses were constructed on a masonry foundation of local materials and imported European bricks, which were brought on sailing ships as ballast. Plaster finishes were done with a lime mortar, which was prepared by burning cut coral stones in a kiln to produce a lime powder. This powder was turned to mortar by mixing it with beach sand, water and sometimes molasses.

Local tropical hardwoods were sometimes used, but for the most part, imported pitch pine was the favored material for the skeleton of the structure atop the masonry foundation. Cypress shingle or shipboard siding was used for exterior sheeting.

For the construction of roofs, craftsmen chose either thatch, shingle, tile or, later, galvanized sheeting. In wooden folk cottages, the roof took one of the three basic styles — gable, hip or shed. The hip roof was the type most commonly found in the Danish West Indies. Its form can be traced to both Africa and Europe. This roof shape, usually constructed with steep pitches, has several advantages. In Europe the hip roof design was used to prevent large accumulations of snow on rooftops. In Africa it allowed quick drainage of rain from the thatch roof. In tropical architecture, its high ceilings





*Weathered by years of hurricane seasons, an abandoned wattle and daub house still stands in St. John, its basketwork structure exposed by the elements. (Photo by Fred Nabwooksy)*

allowed hot air to rise. This feature, in addition to the cross ventilation from windows and doors, enabled the structures to remain cool during the hot summer months. The durability of hip roofs was evident after the devastation of hurricane Hugo in September 1989. The four sloping sides of the hip roof present minimal resistance to the wind, allowing it to blow over and around the roof structure. As an added safety feature, craftsmen would build the roofs of galleries separate from that of the main structure. This would ensure that when a storm tore off the roof of a more exposed and vulnerable gallery, the roof of the main house would not go with it.

Wooden doors and shutters were simply detailed and gave protection from the elements. These had simple metal hinges and were fastened from the inside by means of a wooden bar cradled by metal brackets. Interior wooden jalousies allowed privacy and ventilation. Metal fittings were usually forged by local blacksmiths. Galleries were not very common with the smallest, older frame cottages. However, one would always find decorative trim attached.

On the island of St. Croix one can find an assortment of decorative trim. Frederiksted is known for its gingerbread, an impressive decorative feature. Gingerbread refers to the strips of ornately carved designs used along the roof ledge and balconies, which give the effect of lace trim.

In 1878 Frederiksted was virtually burnt to the ground during the "Fire Burn" carried out by Africans who wanted an end to slavery. Although emancipation had been granted in 1848, Crucians were still under the yoke of the White planters who continued to exploit them. During the period of reconstruction of the town, many former slaves acquired property and moved in from neighboring estates. Wood houses became very popular.

During this era of the Industrial Revolution, mass production and modern transportation brought greater wealth to an ever-increasing number of people in the United States and Europe. This accumulation resulted in a steady growth of the middle class and a proliferation of its style of opulence. The style was imitated by local land and property owners who adapted published patterns to suit their own taste and homegrown aesthetic.

In European architecture, Victorian Gothic and Italian Villa themes were in vogue. *Nouveau riches* in the Americas seized and embellished these styles using wood as their principal building material. The actual construction techniques of the wooden frame cottages on all three islands were similar, although the construction terminology sometimes differed from island to island.

This method of construction continued up to the mid 1930s. The introduction of American cut-and-nail techniques eventually replaced the practice of mortise and tenon construction. The old method, however, can still be found in neighboring islands.

Most of the structures in the Virgin Islands were designed and constructed by skilled, local carpenters who passed their techniques from one generation to the next by oral tradition. They took pride in their creations, and they built three beautiful towns. Their work represents a fusion of European and African contributions.

Today many of our wooden structures are on the verge of collapse. It is incumbent on us to restore and to preserve for future generations this architectural heritage, which represents a history of people's lives and the times they lived in. Homes built by Afro-Caribbean people are now primarily of concrete. Introduced into the islands in the early 1900s, this type of structure represents a new era in Caribbean architecture. But my question is, at what cost? As we see the wooden frame cottage disappear from our countryside, towns and neighborhoods, they are being replaced with foreign and insensitive reinforced concrete and steel frame monsters. One can't help but feel a sense of displacement, though others see in these developments a sign of progress, of our entrance into modern times.

The new structures also speak of our changing relationship with the land. As we house our people in high-rise, multi-level complexes, we radically alter their relationship with the environment and with a way of life that involved direct contact with the earth. The consequences are grave. We can change our way of living, but only so much before we, ourselves, become displaced. Our historic towns and neighborhoods provide us a sense of regional identity and represent our inherited cultural legacy. We are one with the tradition.



*Neighbors construct a thatched roof but in St. Thomas in the 19th century. (Photo courtesy the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources)*