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Author

Chapman, William R

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A Little More Gingerbread: Tourism, Design and Preservation in the Caribbean

The tourism industry, an economic mainstay of Caribbean islands for decades, has had a significant impact on Caribbean architecture. Most recently, attention has turned to the idea of “quality tourism,” which emphasizes using existing historic buildings, sites and districts, along with traditional cultural activities or events, as a basis for encouraging tourism, promoting economic growth and establishing a greater sense of cultural pride among local inhabitants.¹

Not surprisingly, the concept of “quality tourism” is attractive to advocates of historic preservation, since it encourages the retention and preservation of historic resources as well as the enhancement of natural and built environments.² But the pursuit of “quality tourism” also has had detrimental effects on preservation. In some cases, the lessons of the historic fabric have been discarded in favor of superficial visual effects. “Caribbean-style” architectural elements, which are derived from generalized notions about Caribbean architecture rather than careful study of local styles and traditions, are being introduced to add decorative flavor to both existing historic buildings and new infill buildings in historic areas.

The relationship between “quality tourism” and preservation also can be considered within a broader framework. Both approaches toward managing the built environment have been imported into the Caribbean from elsewhere. The Caribbean region has not had a strong attachment to notions of maintaining architectural authenticity and retaining historic fabric. This may be due, in part, to the long history of destruction, replacement and reconstruction the region has experienced as a result of frequent storms and other natural disasters. And it may be because many native islanders have tended to associate traditional architecture with colonialism and to regard the introduction of International Style architecture (and the loss of buildings from the colonial era) as a positive change.

William R. Chapman



Traditional Caribbean architectural forms and ornamentation, such as this woodwork, are being appropriated by new projects without regard to authentic context. Inset: A vernacular cottage on Aneгада, an island with 150 such structures and about 100 residents. Despite proposals for a modest guest house industry, there is little hope such buildings will survive. Photos by William Chapman.

So, while the proliferation of the “Caribbean style” might run counter to preservation practices accepted in the U.S. and Western Europe, it also can be seen as an expression of local pride in the region’s architecture. The challenge is to balance an architecture that is inspired by the past and expresses local pride with practices that accurately conserve the detail of traditional historic structures and areas.

Tourism and the Interest in Traditional Architectural Styles

The Caribbean region has a rich architectural legacy, most of it colonial. There are Spanish-colonial churches, houses and fortifications; French, English and Dutch architecture, with Georgian, Baroque and Neoclassical influences; and a profusion of small wooden cottages, commercial warehouses and other vernacular representations of local building practices. Danish, Swedish and German settlers also influenced the region’s cultural and architectural character, and there is a yet uncharted African heritage. The region’s architecture also is informed by the climate and often common economic and historic conditions.

Building types and styles vary greatly from island to island and country to country. Larger, Spanish-speaking islands, such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba possess a strong heritage of religious, institutional and residential buildings built of masonry and rooted in the classical architectural language of the Mediterranean. (For example, arcades are common.) The French islands, such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, have a composite architectural legacy, infused with distinctively French architectural fashions of the late nine-

teenth and early twentieth centuries; mansard roofs and decorative quoins, for example, are common in Fort de France and in Pointe-à-Pitre.

The English islands, Jamaica and Barbados, and many eastern Caribbean islands have a profusion of Palladian-inspired homes and governmental and institutional buildings — they are largely symmetrical with pediments, columns and rusticated cut masonry walls. Wood construction, sometimes combined with masonry, also is found on these islands; cities like Kingston (in Jamaica) and St. John’s (in Antigua) display a cohesive range of neoclassically informed buildings and smaller cottages derived from them.

The true wealth of the islands, however, is in the “particulars.” Each island has its own architectural traditions, visible in the particular placement of porches and verandahs, in the design of windows and staircases, and in the orientation and decoration of buildings. For example, on some islands porches are typically recessed into the house; on other islands they are typically attached to the house. It

is this richness that lends distinction to the islands and, ultimately, makes them attractive to outsiders — and to the tourism that increasingly underwrites their economies.

Tourism has been important to the economic well-being of Caribbean islands for some 40 years. In the 1950s it was generally a small-scale industry, attracting mostly wealthy visitors who came for extended stays and lodged in relatively expensive hotels. During the 1960s and 1970s, mass tourism — made possible by cheaper and more plentiful cruises, package vacations and hotels — became the model for tourism development on most Caribbean islands.³ On Martinique, for example, the government sponsored the construction and operation of tourist enclaves that featured multi-story hotels, casinos and beaches — all segregated from the life of local inhabitants. Promotion almost always focused on the lure of pristine beaches, cheap liquor and an escape from the rigors of northern climates.

Not surprisingly, most large tourist resorts built during this era employed



the architectural language of the International Style, often with the encouragement and sanction of native-born officials. In fact, after World War II most residential and commercial architecture in the Caribbean essentially abandoned more traditional forms. While some local elements (such as a preference for hipped roofs for many private homes) remained popular, most newer buildings, as well as unregulated reworkings of older ones, were influenced by the International Style and by changing building technologies and components.

For a number of reasons, the "mass tourism" approach is being reconsidered. During the past 40 years Caribbean islands have slowly recognized that their culture, history and architecture have value, both as a source of local pride and as a resource for tourism development. One reason was the lesson of nearby Bermuda (not a Caribbean nation), which learned that careful regulation of older buildings, largely "tasteful" newer development and working alliances among unions, government and developers resulted in

a clean and prosperous, largely tourism-sustained environment.

Also, regulation of historic landmarks and districts came early to some parts of the Caribbean. St. Croix, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, established a protective ordinance in 1952, making it a U.S. preservation pioneer, and legislation was passed for San Juan, Puerto Rico, in the mid-1950s.⁴ Both were influenced by the U.S. National Park Service, which has maintained a presence there since the early 1950s. Other islands have followed suit to some degree; only a few have yet to establish any design review authority.

At the same time, there has been increasing attention given to retaining and restoring locally important historic sites, such as government houses, fortifications, churches and schools. On many islands, the impetus came from Europeans and North Americans who brought with them a heightened awareness of the historic value of older properties and of local cultures. Scholarly, locally generated restorations of Old San Juan and Old Havana, and the massive redevelop-

ment of historic sites like the Citadelle in Haiti or El Morro and San Cristóbal in San Juan set precedents.⁵

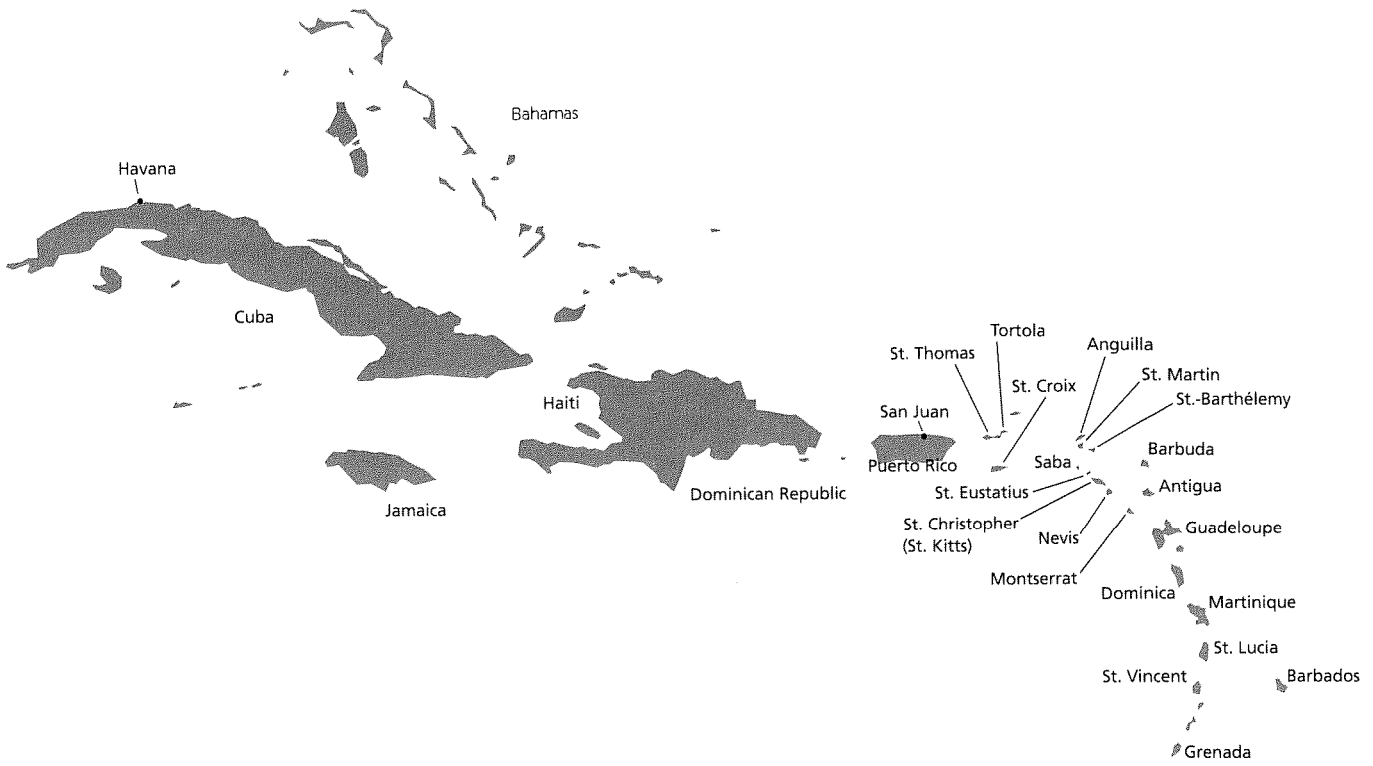
By the 1980s the idea of using local culture and architecture as a resource to draw tourists had matured into "quality tourism." The concept was popular within certain circles in the tourism industry and government; it was embraced as an alternative to mass tourism, especially for islands lacking the economic base or traditional attractions of the more successful mass-tourism islands. "Quality tourism" also gained acceptance among local inhabitants and outsiders drawn to the deeper cultural values of the region; they saw it as a means of counteracting the often negative social effects of large-scale tourism and preserving what was left of local culture and heritage.⁶ The concept was promoted by a number of conferences, including a symposium on "quality tourism" sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and held in St. Thomas and St. Croix in 1988.⁷

This culturally oriented tourism model is being practiced to one degree

The careful restoration of El Morro, a fort in San Juan, is typical of projects that directed attention to the region's historic resources.

Many people see the value of conserving their property, but their methods are not always in keeping with strict preservation practices. Stripped plaster and ferns make their appearance in Frederiksted, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.





or another on most Caribbean islands, most successfully on larger islands with long-standing and relatively well defined cultural traditions, notably Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This model has a clear place on many smaller islands as well, notably St. Barthélemy, Saba and tiny St. Eustatius, all of which promote the preservation and enhancement of traditional architecture as a principal aspect of their tourism development.

The "Caribbean Style"

"Quality tourism" has embraced and encouraged a sympathetic posture toward the traditional architecture of the region. More than ever before, traditional Caribbean architecture is being celebrated as a cultural legacy and recognized as a factor that contributes to the special quality of each

island. Nevertheless, this sympathetic posture has had a mixed impact on the architectural character of historic buildings, historic districts and the areas that surround them.

Developers and property owners, lured by the prospect of tourist income and spurred by the growing interest in historic architectural styles, have been increasingly willing to recognize and preserve (usually on their own initiative) individual historic properties and historic districts. This is an important way of maintaining historic fabric: Many of the sites, especially those turned into smaller hotels, were once plantations, often derelict or in ruins before redevelopment; in-town projects typically focus on the re-use of utilitarian buildings like warehouses.

But these restorations often follow a somewhat romantic approach to architectural conservation that is usu-

ally only loosely grounded in recognized preservation and conservation techniques. Such approaches are typical in popular tourist areas, such as the Charlotte Amalie shopping district in St. Thomas, with hundreds of boutiques and shops spread among historic streets and alleys. Stripped stucco walls and varnished mahogany doors have become an endemic feature, replacing the more prosaic, and authentic, painted pine planks and metal doors.⁸

More recently, new design influences have begun to appear, particularly in new construction. Superficial applications of bright Caribbean colors, sawn-wood decoration (the proverbial, popular "gingerbread" decoration), latticework, widely spaced stock rails, balusters, plywood shutters and repetitive concrete arches, which often were not common to a particular island or type of building, have nevertheless become endemic features, especially in tourist-oriented development.

For example, Villa Madeleine in St. Croix, a recently completed guesthouse and condominium development, repeats the common forms of hipped roofs, verandahs and "gingerbread." But the scale of its buildings and the organization of their mass have no precedent on the island, and the ornamentation used on the balustrades on the verandas are details not common to St. Croix. The new Four Seasons Hotel in Nevis borrows basic elements like decorative trim and attached shutters, but ignores the scale, materials and overall character of its surprisingly rich architectural surroundings.

These efforts have been encouraged by scholarly and semi-scholarly publications, as well as the immensely popular book *Caribbean Style*, which was written by Guadeloupe residents the late Jack Berthelot and Martine



The vernacular versus the "Caribbean Style" on St. Kitts. Left, a country rectory that is threatened with loss. Above, the Golden Lemon Hotel is

evocative of a generalized Caribbean tradition, but the roof shape, color and scale are not in keeping with local building styles.

Gaume,⁹ and which serves almost as a Kodacolor version of a builder's handbook. This architectural approach has also been reinforced by the post-modernism and neotraditionalism popular among North American and European architects working in the region.

Unfortunately, many newer review boards and advocacy groups fail to recognize a difference between genuinely historic buildings and Caribbean-style architecture. In St. Thomas and St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, most projects have reflected changing fashions, not a concerted conservation philosophy, despite scrutiny by an architectural review board. Stucco stripping was wide-spread in the 1970s, following comparable practices on the U.S. mainland. Fixed, glazed windows, which accommodate air-conditioning and emphasize modern construction and use, also were common.¹⁰ On St.

Kitts, a well-meaning Beautification Society is actively promoting replacement Caribbean-style buildings as a ready alternative to restoration.¹¹

Such treatment is relatively harmless when it occurs apart from historic contexts. However, when it appears within historic towns and districts — in new projects, as a replacement for historic buildings, or as inspiration for reworkings of older buildings — the results are damaging. Projects evoke the same spirit that produced Disney World's "Caribbean Resort" (the completion of which in the late 1980s was a milestone in the awakening to Caribbean architectural traditions): They reach back to the region's cultural roots, but intertwine these roots to create something that is more fantasy than homage and erodes the value of remaining authentic design and fabric.

Success Stories

The "quality tourism" approach and the increased interest in the Caribbean region's traditional architecture have had some positive effects, as well. Generally, this has occurred where tourism, although important to the local economy, exists at a smaller scale and is more closely tied to an island's heritage; where general affluence and enlightened self-regulation have emphasized the value of historic architecture; where architectural experts work with review boards and restoration projects to ensure high standards are met; and where people building private homes have been able to hire architects sensitive to local traditions.

On St. Barthélemy, for example, older houses have become cherished gems. The island cultivated a small-scale, luxury tourist industry, not mass tourism, and integrated the local population into the tourism economy and



Talbot House, a new house on Nevis. The placement of the porch and the roof volumes borrow skillfully from local traditions.

Photos courtesy the Taft Group.



A vernacular house on Nevis.

the tourist experience. Both visitors and residents have had a greater appreciation of the island's cultural history; there are numerous examples of meticulously restored small wood and masonry houses scattered throughout this island.

Although tourism is a small business on St. Eustatius, it is considered a vital component of the local economy and has helped to underwrite the preservation and restoration of several historic buildings. Tourism promotion efforts have included the production of a walking tour guide, the marketing of reproduction prints and gifts, and culturally oriented study tours sponsored by organizations like the Smithsonian Institution.

Restoration work on St. Eustatius has been guided in large part by professional architects working for the government of the Netherlands

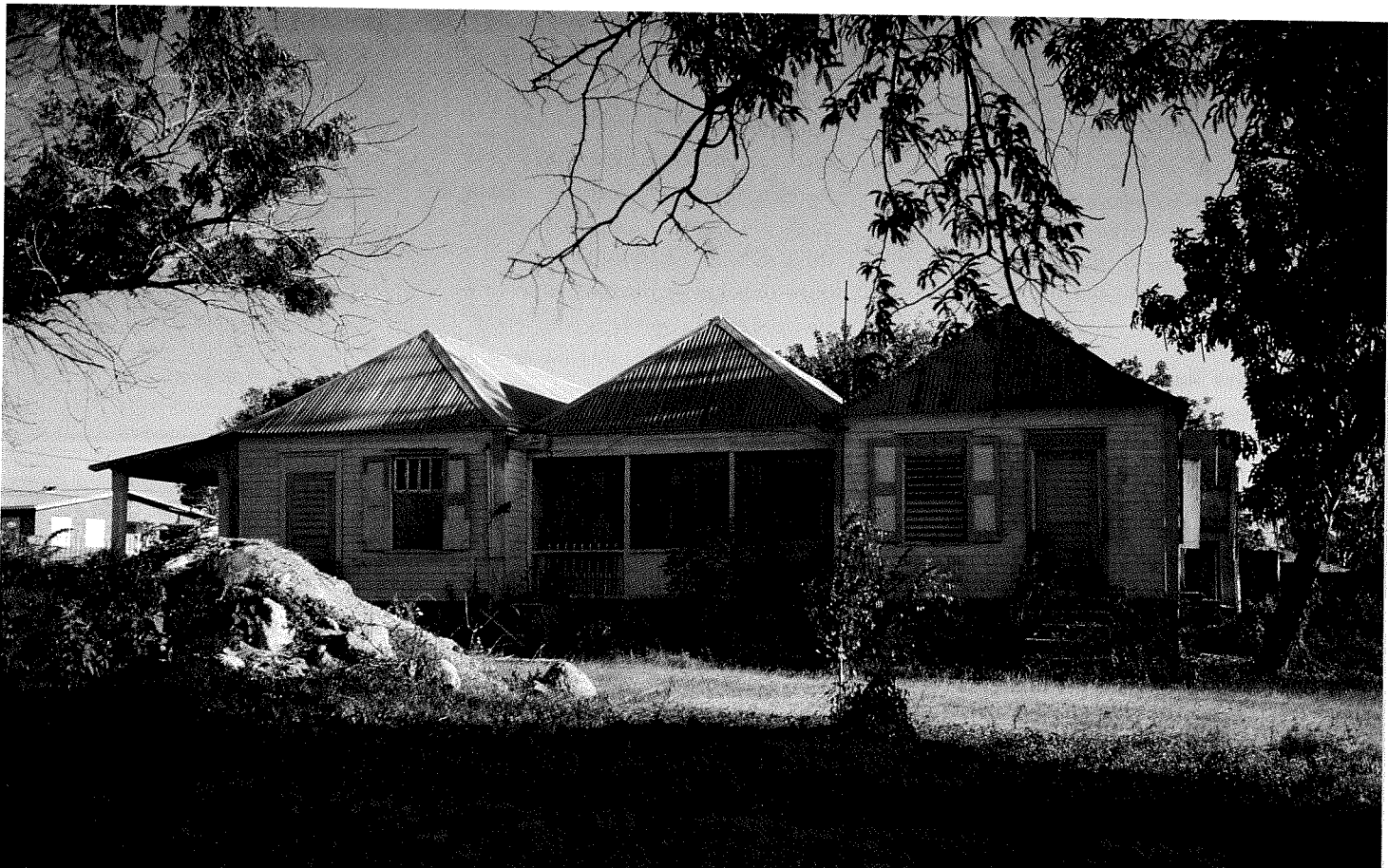
Antilles; standards have been high and there has been little introduction of fantasy elements. The College of William and Mary has operated a field school on the island for several years, and this has helped encourage local awareness as well. Recently the Doncher House, formerly a private mansion for a local merchant and now a museum and interpretive center, received an American Express preservation award for its meticulous restoration and rehabilitation.

The Dutch island of Saba, a little island with a small permanent population, has focused tourism development upon a guest house industry, local crafts and its generally pleasant, well-managed environment. The population is relatively prosperous; many of the residents have stable employment with the Dutch colonial government. There are numerous local historic

preservation advocates and historians, and historic houses and churches are carefully repaired and valued.

In other cases, islands have been fortunate in attracting a number of architects sensitive to local traditions. Many newer houses imitate historic forms but in an abstract, sophisticated way: Designers have focused on respecting the scale, modular character and materials of traditional local buildings, rather than copying decorative elements in a superficial manner.

On St. Barth, architect Pierre Monsaigeon built his home following the local building traditions of modular forms and organic growth. He started with a single module in 1978 and has added new modules over time, repeating the character and scale of traditional buildings. He used masonry, noted the traditional irregular arrangement of windows and followed



the common practice of recessing the hipped roof from the edge of exterior walls (rain water, gathered in a gutter atop the wall, is diverted to cisterns).¹²

The Taft Group, from Houston, has designed two notable houses on Nevis. One, the Talbot House, draws directly on local housing prototypes; the pitched roof modules reflect the arrangement of rooms in the house, and the verandah is placed in a traditional location. Another, the Olsen house, appears to draw from other sources, suggesting the industrial heritage of the island (Nevis was devoted to sugar cane and growing sugar processing until recently), as well as utilizing local materials and textures.

Exceptional sites of international interest also have received careful attention. Puerto Rico has embarked on an ambitious program of further redevelopment in Old San Juan and also in a number of other cities on the island, most notably Ponce. Work within urban contexts is generally of a high standard and is carefully regulated by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Similar successes can be cited for Santo Domingo, Havana and Martinique (where the historic site of St. Pierre, destroyed by the eruption of Mount Pelee in 1902, is now a major tourist attraction).

Another Approach to Tourism and Preservation

The growing acceptance of the importance of heritage tourism in the Caribbean, along with the infusion of a generic Caribbean-style architecture into the region, is creating architectural incongruities that are eroding the character and quality of historic prop-

erties and districts. Caribbean countries that want to encourage “quality tourism” can take several steps to avoid some of these problems.

First, they must draw a clear distinction between buildings that have a genuine historic role and buildings that simply have a Caribbean flavor. Local and international organizations must stress that historic buildings and districts are the sum of their parts, and if the parts are distorted, the historic resource loses its value. This approach must be supported by further research into conservation approaches appropriate for the region and a greater acceptance of allowing older buildings to show their age.

Second, newer, superficial Caribbean-style architecture should be rejected for rehabilitation, restoration and new construction within historic districts. For these projects, the Venice Charter (and on U.S. islands, the Secretary of Interior’s “Standards”) should be invoked.

While there are no ready prescriptions for what constitutes appropriate design for buildings near historic areas, newer construction should look more thoughtfully to regional building traditions. Issues of scale and massing are particularly important because most buildings on these islands are relatively small. For projects with larger programs, it might be possible to maintain continuity and cohesiveness by breaking up the massing into smaller units. In general, newer buildings should be based on simplified versions of various local types.

Finally, these countries should identify cultural and historic sites that would be interesting to tourists and ensure that they are restored carefully. Most Caribbean islands possess a wealth of sites with great cultural or associative significance, such as fortifi-

cations, plantations, ruined sugar mills, factories, worker villages and sites where important events occurred. “Quality tourism” strategies should place more emphasis on developing these sites as tourist destinations than on turning historic districts into tourist shopping areas.

There is a tendency to overreact to trends that appear on the surface to degrade historic sites and falsify the record. While most preservation advocates adhere to the Ruskinian dictates of minimal intervention and maximum retention of historic fabric, some allowance must be made for the awakening of a new sensitivity. Caribbean-style architecture is an expression of regional architectural pride despite its origins in mainly European and North American reactions to local conditions.

This awakening is a hopeful sign; kept out of historic districts and encouraged to draw more exclusively on local practices and traditions, rather than on generalized Caribbean motifs, the newer architecture can do much to help increase local pride and refocus attention on remaining authentic architecture.

Notes

1. See Alfred Edmond, Jr., “The Marketing of Paradise,” *Black Enterprise* 18 (1988): 62. Early identification of the potential for sympathetic tourism development is found in “Permanent Tourism: A New Export Diversification for Less-Developed Countries,” *International Development Review* 13 (1971): 20-23; and John M. Bryden, *Tourism and Development: A Case Study of the Commonwealth Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

2. See, for example, the proceedings of the conference, "Preservation and the Quality of Life," Columbia University, 18-19 January 1989.
3. Announced by studies such as R.C. Ming, "Tourism's Potential for Contributing to the Economic Development in the Caribbean," *Journal of the Role of Tourism in Caribbean Development* (Barbados: Caribbean Economical Consultation for Development, 1971) and L. A. Perez, "Tourism in the West Indies," *Journal of Communications* 25 (1975): 136-43.
4. San Juan's regulations, dating to 1955, are described in *Origen, Gobierno y Propositos del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriquena*, pamphlet, revised 1988. The history of Virgin Islands preservation laws is described in William R. Chapman, *Interim Guidelines for Historic and Architectural Controls of the Virgin Islands* (St. Thomas: Division for Archaeology and History Preservation, no date).
5. For example, the Garrison in Barbados, Fort Oranje in St. Eustatius and the Whim Plantation Museum in St. Croix were developed as museum-type sites in the 1960s and 1970s. Commercial interests, combined with antiquarianism, helped create the Nelson's dockyard development, a consortium of restoration efforts initiated in Antigua in 1951 by the Society of Friends and English Harbour and opened to tourists in 1961.
6. See especially M. Fox, "The Social Impact of Tourism: A Challenge for Researchers and Planners," in B. R. Binney and A. Watson, eds., *A New Kind of Sugar: Tourism in the Pacific* (Santa Cruz: Center for South Pacific Studies, 1977).
7. "Tourism and Preservation: Improving the Quality of of the Tourism Product," conference held 18-19 May, 1988, St. Thomas and St. Croix. Discussed further in "Tourism and Preservation: An Exciting Conference on an Exciting Concept," *Postbassen* (April 1988): 1-3.
8. Despite much unsympathetic work, sections of Charlotte Amalie, including the sensitively rehabilitated Royal Dane Mall area, retain a strong sense of historic character and identity.
9. Suzanne Slesin, Stafford Cliff, Jack Berthelot, Martine Guame, et al., *Caribbean Style* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1985).
10. Recent guidelines may help counteract the impact. See William R. Chapman and Jeanne Strong, *Virgin Islands Preservation Guidelines 1-16* (St. Thomas: Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources, 1991).
11. The work of the Beautification Society is described in various issues of *Heritage*, published by the St. Christopher Heritage Society, Basseterre, St. Kitts, West Indies.
12. Jean-Luc Cailleux, Nathalie Herard and Philippe Hochart, *Architecture St. Bart: Une ile et ses maisons* (Gustavia, St. Barthélémé: Les Editions du Latanier, 1989).

Juliet Barclay

Eusebio Leal Spengler — the Havana city historian, Director of the Museum of Havana and professor at the University of Havana — is directing the restoration of Old Havana, a highly respected Caribbean project that recently was designated a World Heritage site. He was elected to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba in 1991. He was interviewed for Places by Juliet Barclay.

Many of the restored buildings in Old Havana have changed in use from residences to museums and cultural centers. In view of the acute shortage of housing in Cuba and especially Havana, how can you justify the spending of money and resources in this manner?

I have always defended the view that Old Havana is a place to be lived in, not only a place to be looked at. However, more than 83,000 people live in Old Havana, in conditions that are totally filthy, ignoble and inhumane, so the residential population must be drastically reduced.

We have identified more than 900 historic buildings in Old Havana and we have also prioritized and determined which are the most important residential areas. But it is also necessary to create certain areas that are indispensable to culture because while people need food and shelter, they also need soul, spirit and strength. We have tried to

Sentry box in a wall of El Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magos del Morro. Photos by Juliet Barclay.

