

PRESERVING THE BUILT HERITAGE OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

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BUILT HERITAGE ACROSS THE CARIBBEAN

- Product of Indigenous, African, European, Asian, and Creole interactions, creating highly distinctive architectural traditions
- Not simply structures but act as archives of memory, knowledge, identity, labour, migration, and resistance
- Historic settlements often evolved in direct dialogue with coastal access, trade routes, plantation economies, and local ecologies
- Vernacular architecture reveals how Caribbean communities historically adapted to heat, humidity, hurricanes, and resource scarcity
- Contributes to cultural identity, tourism economies, education, and social cohesion, making it both a cultural and developmental asset

CARIBBEAN BUILT HERITAGE HAZARD CONTEXT

- Exposed to hurricanes, storm surge, coastal erosion, flooding, earthquakes, landslides, drought, and salt intrusion
- Climate change is intensifying the frequency, unpredictability, and cumulative impacts of hazards
- Historic districts are often located in coastal or low-lying zones, increasing long-term vulnerability
- Human-made threats including urban expansion, infrastructure development, neglect, and incompatible interventions can be as destructive as natural hazards
- Heritage loss often occurs incrementally, through repeated exposure and deferred maintenance rather than a single catastrophic event



CHALLENGES OF BUILT HERITAGE PRESERVATION

- Many Caribbean islands lack comprehensive heritage inventories, condition assessments or digital baselines
- Heritage legislation often exists, but implementation, monitoring, and enforcement remain uneven
- Historic buildings frequently compete with commercial interests, tourism expansion, and land value pressures
- Conservation skills such as lime plastering, timber repair, and traditional joinery are disappearing across the region
- Small island governments often face difficult trade-offs between immediate economic priorities and long-term cultural stewardship

Preservation is constrained by limited funding, development pressures, weak enforcement, and increasing climate vulnerability



A bulldozer was onsite on Thursday when the Sunday Sun passed. A decision was made to salvage the stone blocks from the demolished structures for use in the new buildings. (Picture by Shanice King.)

Pierhead project 'broadly on track'



The PierHead will house a variety of restaurants as seen in this artist's impression. (GIC)

The Pierhead Project in Bridgetown is "broadly on track", according to a source connected with the project. The official however noted that "piling will not be starting in September".

Demolition work for the \$160 million project began in March to remove some of the old warehouse buildings on the site, which engineers determined would not be able to bear the weight of some of the planned multi-storied new structures. However, in keeping with efforts to preserve historical features of the Pierhead which lies within the UNESCO World Heritage site of Bridgetown and its Garrison, the decision was made to salvage the stone blocks from the demolished structures for use in the new buildings.

In giving the update on the progress of the work, the source

said: "Currently on site, the salvage operation and the taking down of the two main warehouses called the Steel Building and the House of Pillars is complete; the foundation slabs for the Steel Building and House of Pillars are being carefully removed."

Site and staff offices have also been set up on the ground floor of Bridge House.

Three phases

In an on-spot local television interview four months ago, the developer, former Coca Cola chairman Neville Isdell, revealed the residential and commercial project to be built "in three phases", would consist of "The Steel Building; the House of Pillars; Bridge House and the Blackwood Screw Dock". He also projected then,

that "some construction should start by the end of the year, with "about 46 apartments" to be built in the first phase of the project, part of an eventual total of 174 apartments that would be constructed by the end of Phase 3.

At that time, the developer also gave an idea of the make-up of the Pierhead development, pointing out it would not be exclusively for tourists. He said it was also being designed taking Barbadians and their interests into consideration, with features such as "cafes, restaurants, shops and a beach club".

A printed promotional article on the development by the Altman Real Estate Group also states: "The PierHead will be a multi-dimensional destination, boasting an array of features to cater to residents, visitors and businesses alike. "The thoughtfully designed

apartments will incorporate office spaces, promoting a seamless work-life integration for those who call The PierHead home."

Restaurants

The PierHead will house a variety of restaurants, with the main attraction nestled along the beachside among luxurious beach cabanas. Other eateries will spill onto The Carriageway from the four main buildings, providing waterfront and city views. Additionally, a rooftop restaurant overlooking Parliament and a unique dining experience set in an old Molasses Tank will add to the culinary delights.

In the television interview, Isdell said he expected the project would be completed "in about 72 months". (GIC)

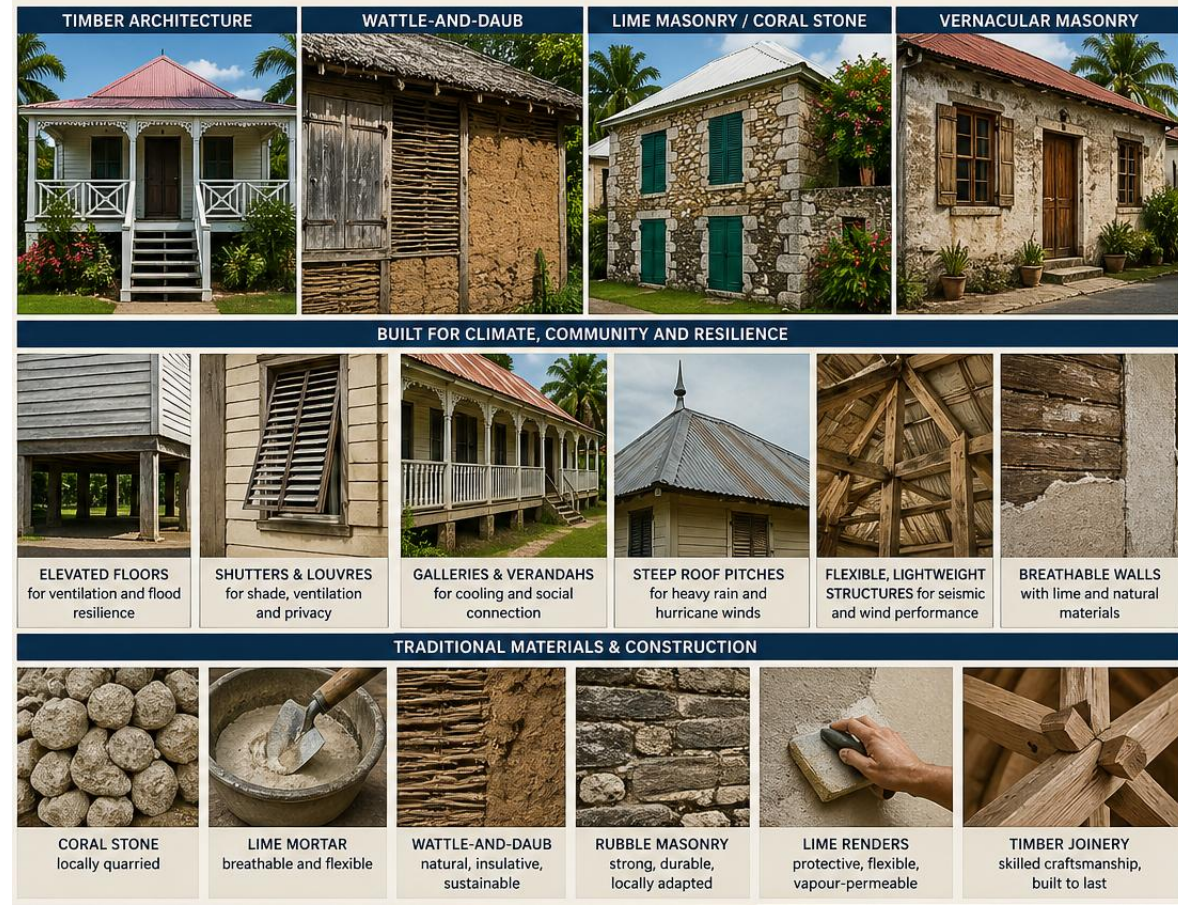
CARIBBEAN VERNACULAR HERITAGE

- These materials and structures are increasingly vulnerable to termites, fungal decay, salt intrusion, moisture fluctuations, hurricanes, coastal erosion, and deferred maintenance, particularly in rapidly urbanising coastal settings
- The replacement of traditional materials with cement-based mortars, synthetic finishes, and incompatible modern interventions can trap moisture, accelerate deterioration, and compromise both structural performance and authenticity
- The loss of vernacular buildings represents more than architectural loss, it also signals the erosion of traditional craftsmanship, construction knowledge, community memory, and place-based identity across the Caribbean



CARIBBEAN VERNACULAR HERITAGE

- Reflects centuries of environmental adaptation, cultural exchange, and material ingenuity, drawing on locally available resources such as timber, clay, limestone, coral stone, shell, marl, and plant fibres
- Traditional construction systems including timber framing, wattle-and-daub, lime mortar, rubble masonry, coral stone blockwork, and lime-rendered surfaces demonstrate sophisticated responses to tropical climates, humidity, ventilation, and storm exposure
- Features such as elevated floors, shutters, galleries, steep roof pitches, breathable wall systems, and flexible structural designs reveal deep local knowledge of climate resilience and everyday living in island environments



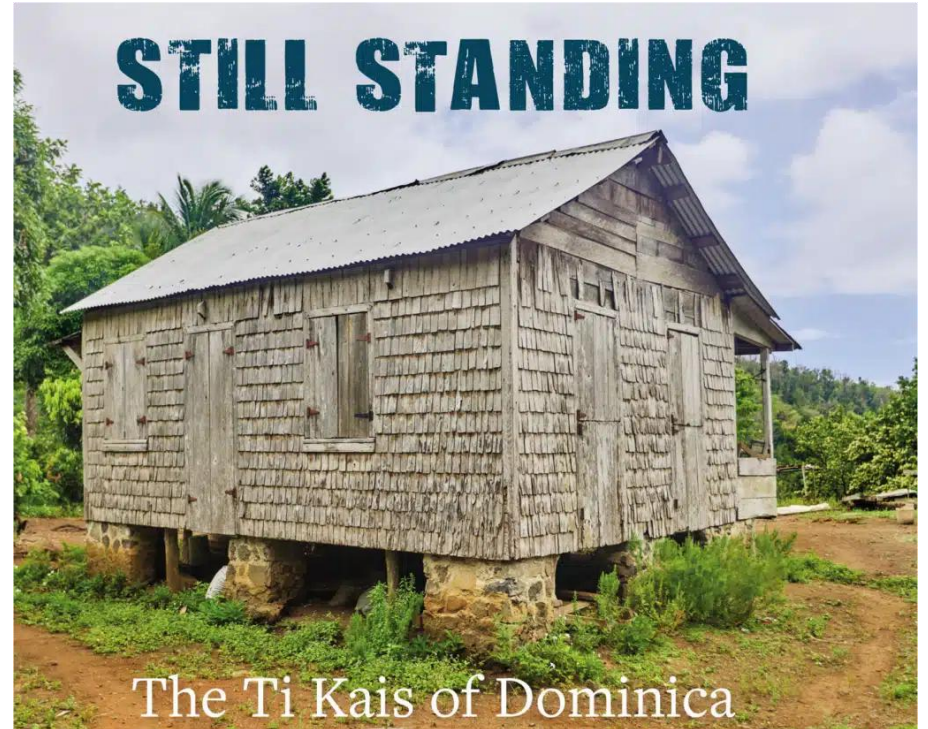
BARBADOS – CHATTEL HOUSES

- Designed for mobility and economic uncertainty in post-emancipation society
- Symbolise ownership, autonomy, and cultural adaptation
- Built for disassembly, transport, and climatic responsiveness
- Now increasingly threatened by urban redevelopment and changing land values



TI'KAI HOUSES (DOMINICA)

- Reflect strong connections between architecture, landscape, and community
- Built using local timber and environmental knowledge
- Hurricane resilience



MISS LASSIE'S COTTAGE (THE CAYMAN ISLANDS)

- Represents the intersection of built heritage, artistic expression, and local identity
- Embodies community memory beyond architectural value
- Demonstrates the vulnerability of small-scale heritage assets in rapidly changing urban environments



BUILT HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN A HIGH-RISK ENVIRONMENT

- Conservation requires balancing authenticity with resilience in the face of escalating climate hazards
- Traditional conservation often prioritises material authenticity and minimum intervention
- Climate adaptation demands structural reinforcement, moisture control, drainage upgrades, and retrofitting
- Adaptive reuse can create economic sustainability while extending building life
- The challenge is ensuring interventions do not erase historic character or cultural significance
- Conservation increasingly asks: **Are we preserving materials, function, meaning, or all three?**



MAINTAINING SITES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

- Heritage value often extends beyond buildings to include viewsheds, vegetation, shoreline relationships or relationships between land and sea and spatial context
- Rapid development can fragment historic districts and weaken their sense of place
- Coastal engineering and land reclamation may alter the historic environmental setting
- Preserving historic character requires design controls, buffer zones, and context-sensitive planning
- In Cayman, heritage protection must address both individual buildings and historic districts as living landscapes



DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION

- Digital documentation provides critical baseline records that support conservation, management, risk preparedness, and recovery
- Many heritage assets are lost before being fully documented
- Digital records create a permanent baseline of condition, form, and significance
- Documentation supports insurance, emergency response, restoration, and advocacy
- It strengthens evidence-based decision-making for planning authorities
- In disaster contexts, digital records can mean the difference between informed recovery and irreversible loss



SITE: Pedro St. James
DATE: 15/05/2024
WEATHER: Sunny
MISSION: Aerial Documentation
NOTES: Front and East Elevations
Photogrammetry Survey

DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION AS A RESILIENCE TOOL

- Tools like GIS, 3D scanning, and drones enhance monitoring, assessment, and long-term heritage management
- **GIS** supports mapping of hazard exposure, vulnerability, and historic assets
- **Drone surveys** enable rapid post-disaster assessments in difficult terrain
- **Laser scanning and photogrammetry** capture millimetre-level architectural detail.
- **Condition assessment platforms** allow long-term monitoring and maintenance planning
- Digital tools help shift heritage management from reactive to preventative

Monitoring moisture content at Miss Lassie's House © CHC



CASE STUDY: OLD GENERAL HOSPITAL, BARBADOS

Documentation and monitoring informing conservation in a complex urban heritage setting

- Located within Historic Bridgetown and its Garrison world heritage property
- Subjected to structural deterioration, urban pressure, and adaptive reuse debates
- Digital mapping and condition recording supported risk assessment.
- Enabled evidence-based conservation planning and stakeholder engagement
- Demonstrates the value of integrating heritage into broader urban planning.



CASE STUDY: MISS LASSIE'S COTTAGE

- Created a high-resolution record of a culturally significant community site
- Combined architectural documentation with community memory and oral histories
- Supported advocacy for conservation and future interpretation
- Demonstrated how small sites can benefit from advanced documentation
- Reinforced that heritage significance lies in both structure and story



Digital recording preserving fragile heritage and supporting interpretation and recovery

CHALLENGES WITH DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

Barriers include cost, technical capacity, data management, and sustainability

- Equipment and software costs remain high for many heritage organisations
- Technical expertise is unevenly distributed across the region
- Many projects generate data without long-term archiving strategies
- Questions of ownership, access, and digital sovereignty remain unresolved
- Technology without institutional support risks becoming documentation without implementation

Wathey House, Saba © CHC



TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

- Cayman is a microcosm of SIDS heritage challenges
- Heritage must be embedded within national development, climate adaptation, and planning frameworks
- Digital documentation should be part of a wider heritage information ecosystem, not standalone projects
- Capacity building must combine technical training with local craftsmanship and traditional knowledge
- Legal frameworks should strengthen district protection, design review, and conservation incentives
- The most resilient systems combine policy, people, partnerships, and technology

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS: PARAMARIBO

- Private sector investment with government or NGO oversight
- Heritage conservation often exceeds public sector budgets.
- PPPs can unlock private investment for restoration and maintenance
- Adaptive reuse creates economic value while preserving historic character
- Governance safeguards are essential to prevent over-commercialisation
- Successful PPPs depend on shared vision, accountability, and community benefit
- **Stadsherstel Suriname N.V. (Suriname Conservation Ltd.):** Established in 2013, functions as a public-private partnership aimed at purchasing, restoring, and repurposing dilapidated monuments. It serves as a commercially based non-governmental organization to bridge the gap between private ownership and heritage management



Partnerships can mobilise funding and expertise to support conservation and adaptive reuse.

INTERACTIVE: ASSESSING CAYMAN'S PROTECTIVE FRAMEWORK

How well does Cayman currently protect its built heritage?

- Does Cayman have an updated inventory of historic buildings and districts?
- Are heritage considerations integrated into planning approvals?
- Is there adequate funding for maintenance, monitoring, and emergency response?
- What are the barriers to heritage management and protection?
- Do communities feel ownership over heritage protection?
- **Key question:** What is the single most urgent gap in Cayman's heritage protection framework?

