

MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN

The Dutch presence in the Caribbean.

The Dutch presence in the Caribbean started when they conquered the six islands Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius and Saba from the Spaniards in 1634 in search of salt for their fish industry. For a short period the islands were also governed by the English and even the French made three attempts to conquer Curaçao. This island, the biggest of the six, and since colonial times the most important, has the strongest Dutch influence in culture, industry, trade and more specifically on its architecture. The capital Willemstad, divided by the harbor entrance Anna Bay in two halves Punda and Otrabanda, is a remarkable city with an outstanding beauty. Punda has always been the business center, while Otrabanda was more for living. During a certain period Punda was enclosed by a city wall that was erected for defense purposes. The limited space within the wall forced the Dutch military engineers to careful planning along a grid system. Otrabanda on the other hand, grew in a more spontaneous way according to people's needs. This, combined with the different topography of the area, gave Otrabanda a great liveliness.

One of the most remarkable buildings of Punda is the Synagogue Mikvé Israel, the oldest synagogue in use in the western hemisphere. The construction was completed in 1732. It's interior shows a striking resemblance to the Portugues-Israeli synagogue "Esnoga" in Amsterdam of 1675, that served as a model for the synagogue in Curaçao.

Thanks to its authentic architecture with Dutch characteristics Willemstad has been nominated by the United Nations as World Heritage City in 1997.

The architecture of the last century.

Similar to what happened on most of the other colonized islands, the government was centrally directed from the mother country and most know-how, including the art of building, came from these countries. A typical way of building developed, originating in Holland but adapted to the local climate. This architecture showed a remarkable consistency up to 1930. Only around 1900 a Latin-American Art Nouveau style with certain grandeur started to develop in the newer neighborhoods. One of the first examples of Modernist Architecture in Curaçao was the head office of KNSM, the Royal Netherlands Steamship Company, build in 1939-1941 and put to use in early 1942. This building was clearly inspired by the modern buildings in the mother country in that time, like the Town Hall in Hilversum by *Willem Dudok* in 1931. The typical tower in the north-western corner is an architectural element used in several important Dutch buildings in that time. It also served as a defense watchtower during Worldwar II. The

buildings facades made of unplastered brick from Holland and the steep beveled roof clearly reflect the Dutch architectural influence. Other notable features are the series of exclusive and expensive bronze windows.

Not much later a few examples of Art Deco were build in Willemstad, like the Cinelandia open-air Theater in Punda by *Peter Stuyvenberg* in 1941. This building still remains, but is in very bad state of repair. Architectural activists did not succeed to save the Westend Theater in Otrabanda, another building in Art Deco style by the same architect, from demolition. *Stuyvenberg* was the Director of the water distribution company and not trained as an architect. He made several utility buildings like water storage tanks on higher hill tops.

The CPIM (*later Royal Shell*) started an oil refinery in 1915, thanks to the magnificent enclosed harbor. The company was once the biggest in the world in number of different oil products. It was not only the most important economic pillar of the island but also had a strong influence on the island's architecture. The Shell house-architect *Abspoel* made the Head Office building around 1917 in a typical tropical architecture, later followed by the laboratories by the English architects *White and Travers*, build in 1947.

Cornelis Bakker, a Dutch architect who arrived in 1939, was the first professionally trained architect living in Curaçao. Employed by the Department of Public Works he designed most of the important public buildings and schools between 1939 and 1952, when he emigrated to Canada. *Bakker*, who left the government in 1944 to work for the CPIM, also designed the housing quarters for the employees of the company. The Shell buildings and the buildings by the government were strong architectural examples for the local people building their own shelter. They were all adapted to the tropical climate with large roof overhangs and elevations carefully designed for ventilation and daylight access. *Ben Smit*, another Dutch architect who became a partner of *Bakker* in 1950, has an equally impressive record of buildings up to 1971. He was also trained in Holland and build according to the rules of modernism, but tropical and thus climate-efficient. The famous Dutch architect *Gerrit Rietveld*, almost as an incident, made one of the best examples of buildings suitable for our climate, the Mgr. Verriet Institute for physically and mentally retarded people in 1949.

During the period from the forties to the sixties only the two major architects on the island, *Cees Bakker* and *Ben Smit*, joined by a limited group of what I call traveling architects, were able to create a vast number of architectural landmarks with high quality. They made excellent examples of many schools, a hospital, and beautiful houses. All very suitable for their function and well adapted to the site and our climate. The same quality could only be displayed in incidents during the years after. The architects of the next generations like *de Vries*, *Fresco*, *Alexenko*, *Nolte*, *Zingel*, *Julian*, and *Badaracco*

were not really able to establish with their designs, although of high quality, an awareness of the general public for good architecture. In the seventies the local architect *Tom Janga* designed several projects for the government and public institutions. His major work was the Public Library, which is a good example of a contemporary building in an historic environment and suitable for the climate. Not all architects follow the philosophy that the architectural expression should be a reflection of the climate. They sometimes design glass boxes, defending that this new architecture is now possible even on our sunny islands, after the development of better glazing and insulation. Personally I don't support the dependency on highly sophisticated materials or equipment to make buildings resist our tropical environment.

The tradition to study architecture in the mother country still continues, due to favorable scholarships by the government and the advantage of the Dutch language. Architects of the present generation are struggling for recognition from the majority of the population for their profession and the buildings they make. While they try to find an architectural language that is understood and appreciated by the general public, for the sake of their existence they often copy any style that the clients want. The architect's title and/or profession are not protected by law and the majority of the buildings are not designed by professionally trained architects. Spontaneous architecture by non professional architects, for example for single family houses, has always been part of the architectural landscape, but now seems to have expanded to the bigger and more expensive dwellings and also to commercial buildings. Superficial consumer design has almost become a standard for most buildings on the island, including institutional projects. Bad design is supposedly compensated by the use of expensive materials and strong colors, while the failures in climate-efficient design are compensated by more powerful air-conditioning units, which have become even more affordable. The government lost its role as trendsetter, by giving the best examples of how to build. Instead, public entities rent expensive office spaces build by project developers, with no architectural quality whatsoever. And the great opportunities to let local architects show their talents are neglected. For the new headquarters of the Central Bank an unknown American interior designer was hired. Just after this mistake the prison, originally well designed by a Dutch architect of the Department for Public Works, was poorly extended by an American architect. One of the latest doubtful examples of letting others design our future monuments is the new terminal building of the airport. While the original airport building was beautifully designed by *Cees Bakker*, the new building is a bad copy of historical shapes, in order to give the building that "typical Curaçao look". One bad thing that our outstanding monuments did to some architects, especially foreigners for whom this architecture seems to be a revelation, is to make them passive for being creative in their own search for a

local contemporary architecture. Knowing that most people like historical beauty, they prefer to copy the traditional. I think that copying classical forms from monuments in new buildings is not fair to the monuments themselves because it creates a false history, unbelievable and not trustworthy.

My own work

Of all Dutch architects, of whom several were my professors at the Delft University, the most influential on my career was *Aldo van Eyck*. I support his humanist approach towards architecture and his theories of the ‘dual phenomena’, the ‘in between realm’, the ‘threshold’ and the ‘configurative’. I agree with him that the failure of the utilitarian functionalism was the lack of attention for these phenomena. I was also influenced by the work of *Rietveld* who made just one building in Curacao, the Mgr. Verriet Institute as mentioned before. Of the older Caribbean architects I’m most inspired by the organic architecture of the Cuban architect *Ricardo Porro*.

I started my career employed by the Government at the Department of Public Works in 1978. As a young architect I had the privilege to design two large schools and a community center. After three years I joined the office of *Tom Janga* who was then working on the design of the Public Library. In 1985 I started my own practice. In 1991 I had the honor to win an architectural competition for housing and shopping in a very dilapidated area of Otrabanda, together with my Venezuelan colleague *Domenico Silvestro*. The area for construction was surrounded by beautiful historical buildings. After exploring the existing architectural and spatial qualities of the area we decided for an honest dialogue with the old using contemporary shapes and detailing. We discovered that Otrabanda was composed of single buildings, all different from one another and arranged in a more or less spontaneous pattern. We adapted to this pattern giving answers to the neighboring buildings in every corner of the plan. Yes, we used traditional materials like concrete masonry, wooden windows and Dutch roof tiles. But applying these well known materials in a different manner, distinguishes contemporary architecture from the old. We did not deny the fact that in the past the inhabitants of Otrabanda lived partially in the streets, but rather enhanced this phenomenon by creating ample communal outdoor spaces. We colored the buildings with almost all colors of the rainbow continuing a tradition of the local population that I’ve always supported since my earlier works. Thus we created a neighborhood with a local feel, but clearly recognizable as contemporary architecture.

In the past fifteen years my designs became more organic. By placing all rooms on their most ideal location and orientation on the site and in relation to one another I discovered that an organic form happened almost naturally. For my sister I made a house on a rather

steep hillside with a beautiful 180 degree view angle. The building shape was born from the shape and the slope of the lot, and the climatic conditions. The curves and the large overhangs of the living area embrace the outdoor space and widen the views in all directions. The roof, with large overhangs for shading, follows the round shapes.

Where do we go from here?

It can be concluded that the Dutch Caribbean has experienced an architectural history of high quality, which quality is well conserved and valued. However there is a tendency of mediocracy in architecture which is not a healthy continuation of our good building traditions. Our historical monuments and the excellent examples of the Modern Movement can give the local architects sufficient inspiration to continue to make valuable future monuments. For this we just have to shift our focus from consumerism to the basic issues that make up good architecture.

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