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Cayman's Home & Living Magazine

Complimentary



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Photo by Justin Uzzeil

historically speaking

BY JOHN CJ DOAK, RIBA

In 2003 the Cayman Islands will celebrate their 500th anniversary year of discovery by Christopher Columbus who passed by the islands of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman during the latter stages of his fourth voyage through the Caribbean region.

2003 will no doubt be a time for celebration of the developments that have occurred on these three "verdant islands set in the blue Caribbean Sea". Our official history has apparently already been rewritten and will be supplemented by historical photographs, facts, figures and illustrative maps.

For me, as an architect, there is nothing more visually demonstrative of the evolution of Caymanian culture than the stories that can be told by the buildings and structures that we are still fortunate to possess across the landscape of our islands.

Regrettably, with hurricanes and the natural erosions of time there is little evidence of our earliest structures, with the singular example of those times being Pedro St James Castle, built in the mid 18th century. The original parts of the building, which were built in stone, survive to this day. A trip to this historic site provides the visitor with a complete insight to life in

eighteenth century Cayman in many more ways and words than this article can provide.

Prior to the mid 18th century, Cayman was virtually uninhabited and existed as an outpost to the English navies harboured in Jamaica, providing the fleets with turtle meat for their voyages in the region.

While virtually no built evidence survives from those very early times, the Cayman Islands do possess a wonderful inventory of homes from the late 18th to early 19th century providing insightful information about life in the islands. By no coincidence, the distinctive styles of these homes reflect the various eras of our cultural development, as follows:

Wattle and Daub Cottage (late 1700s to late 1800s)

- The Cayman Cabin (late 1800s to late 1900s).
- The Upstairs House (late 1800s to 1980s)
- The Bungalow (1920s to present)
- The Villa (late 1970s to present)

THE WATTLE AND DAUB COTTAGE

The wattle and daub Cottage is the oldest surviving building style and dates back to the mid eighteenth century. The Creole influences of the time are evident in the construction of these, our only truly indigenous, homes. All of the materials required to build the homes could be found throughout Cayman, while their style and construction derived from age-old techniques used throughout the Caribbean.

The walls of this rectangular structure were framed up with a machete using the termite resistant ironwoods that grew so abundantly in those times. The gaps between the wall posts were then infilled with a basketweave of wattled sticks and then plastered either side with a lime daub made from burnt down coral. The structure was economically built using natural materials and provided the occupant with a simple sturdy place to sleep or shade in times of extreme weather. Floors were originally built at ground level with coral rock and hammered earth but later wooden floors were raised above the ground to help prevent insect infestation and flooding. The earliest roofs were thatched using palm tree fronds while, in more recent times, these were replaced with wood shingle or corrugated zinc sheeting.



TOP: A WATTLE AND DAUB COTTAGE • ABOVE: AN UPSTAIRS HOUSE

Windows were simple openings with wood boarded shutters, while woven sack netting and smoke-pots helped keep out the mosquitoes. Cooking and daily chores occurred outside of the dwelling. Each yard had seagrape, almond or other spreading fruit trees providing a shaded outdoor place for the family to congregate.

Today, the Cottage walls are painted in bright or pastel colours, but originally they were simply white limewashed every year around Christmas time when clean sand was also brought up from the beach and raked over the front yard. These customs heralded a fresh start to the coming New Year and are still practiced in the outlying districts.

The earliest settler of Grand Cayman is said to have lived at Old Isaac's at East End, but the first official settlements appear to have been established in the mid 18th century following a series of Land Grants made for properties in West Bay, George Town, Savannah and Bodden Town. Surviving from basic agriculture, fishing and logging it is quite likely that the inhabitants built their homes using the wattle and daub construction technique.

THE CAYMAN CABIN & UPSTAIRS HOUSE

The second house style is known as the Cabin. This style of home emerged in the late nineteenth century period of Industrial Revolution when Caymanians were introduced to the time-saving advantages of using pre-cut lumber. Caymanian men were off at sea for the most part, whether turtling or in the merchant marine so could arrange to ship back materials from trips to the US mainland. Boatbuilding was in its heyday in Cayman so there was no shortage of competence to build these wooden homes. Some of the homes are said to employ many of the construction techniques of these shipwrights.

The Cottage's two or three roomed floor plan was preserved, but the Cabin was framed using 2x4 machine-cut studs and then the walls clad with ship-lapped boarding. With the invention of the fret saw and, being at the height of Victoriana, it was fashionable to have very decorative trimmings and these were used to embellish the simple rectangular shape of the Cabin.



A CAYMAN CABIN WITH ORNATE PORCH TRELLISING

Glazed sash windows became popular with louvred shutters to either side. Roofs were steeply pitched and finished in cedar shingle or zinc sheeting. Verandahs were added along the street facing side of some Cabins providing a grander appearance and a shaded place to meet and greet neighbours.

Many surviving verandahs have very heavily decorated balustrading and hand carved trimmings, some so fanciful that the term "gingerbread" is often used to describe them. Picket fences enclosed raked sand gardens, while conch shells or coral rocks decorate the edges of pathways or lanes.

The cabin style of home is often two-storeyed, with a grand double decked verandah that, in some cases runs entirely around the home. These homes are termed Upstairs Houses and were initially built by successful George Town merchants who took the

roofs off their cabins and added an upper storey. This created a grander appearance befitting their position in the emerging business community. Upstairs Houses are often referred to as Mansions.

THE BUNGALOW

The Bungalow style emerged in the 1920s, following the end of the First World War. The formality of the Victorian style was shunned in favour of what became a freer-formed ranch style of home, with wide roof overhangs and a rambling arrangement of rooms. The 20s were a time of freedom of expression.

With the creation of huge residential suburbs around most US cities, builders' handbooks became available to Cayman seamen, offering a huge selection of Bungalow style floor plans to choose from.



A CONTEMPORARY VILLA - ARCHITECTS, OBM LTD (PROJECT ARCHITECT - JOHN DOAK)

Cayman's Bungalow contained bathrooms and kitchens, which up until the 1920s were accommodated in detached out-houses or cabooses. A Bungalow home would have several bedrooms, a parlour and kitchen all arranged in different configurations, so everyone's house could look different from the next.

THE CONTEMPORARY VILLA

The Bungalow form of homeplan has essentially survived with us until today, and is now finished externally in a variety of styles dubbed by realtors as British Colonial, Spanish, Mediterranean, or Italianate, for example.

Cabin and Cottage homes were around 600 sqft, while the traditional Bungalow was around 1200 sqft. Today our homes are anywhere from a basic 2000 sqft to the six, seven or eight bedroom mansion villa of 10,000 sqft.

Our earlier homes provided the basic needs of shelter for their inhabitants, while our contemporary lifestyle demands the basic appointments of air conditioning and electrical power to service our specially designed spaces known as media or family rooms, kitchens, laundries, garages, studies, dressing rooms etc. We have built boundary walls and fences to protect our properties, abandoned the sociable concepts of the front porch, and closed our tinted glass windows to keep the coolness of the AC inside. The yard has become a manicured grass lawn surrounded by an assortment of imported plantings, some homes also having a swimming pool. Cars are stored in garages.

Clearly our lifestyle today is a far cry from the days of the Cayman turtler but as Cayman prepares to proudly commemorate its 500th anniversary it is interesting to note that the character and style of our homes is still very much influenced by our relationships offshore. Such is 'Island Life'. With an influx of foreigners to our shores it is not surprising that our homes have developed a more 'international' style of influence, however it is even more interesting to observe that there is an increasing desire from all of our population to maintain a 'Cayman Style' derived from the vernacular of our past. Historical references are being replicated in an ever-increasing number of new structures, including hotels, offices and apartment buildings.

As we embark on a new century one wonders whether a newer 'Cayman Style' might emerge. In a world where the marketplace is ever shrinking and where internet and satellite communications make distance and locale almost irrelevant, 'things Caymanian' will become even more important to preserve. This potentially techno-driven era will have to be concerned with eco-tourism, recycling, energy conservation and other environmental issues.

So our future housing will likely be built to balance technological necessities with energy conservation, a combination that ought to lead to a style of architecture that is perhaps more respectful and sustainable for the tropical environment in which we live.

John Doak, whose architectural firm specialises in the design of island homes, has been based on Grand Cayman and designed throughout the Caribbean since 1979. For an informed opinion on construction and development in the Cayman Islands, contact John at (345) 946 3625 or by e-mail to: doak@candw.ky

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