

Cayman Development: Top Ten Milestones



Editor's Note: After almost three decades of study on the subject and developed from a series of articles that first appeared in the Caymanian Compass newspaper in the 1980s, John Doak's long-awaited book entitled Cayman Style will soon be on the local bookshelves.

The transcript for the book which chronicles the development history of the Cayman Islands received an American Express Caribbean Preservation Award in 1994, recognizing the work as a study of Cayman vernacular architecture that will serve as the foundation for a national inventory, as a field guide for surveyors, and as guidelines for a national preservation plan and an educational tool to promote appreciation and respect for local history and culture.

As part of Grand Cayman Magazine's Special Supplement theme for this issue, we invited Doak to consider his top ten "milestones" from his development study of Cayman. Here's his selection:



DRAWING BY JOHN DOAK

No. 1: The Classic Thatched Cabana

The thatched cabana is one of those clichéd images for the region, featured in every travel and tourism publication and, complete with a hammock, chilled cocktail, and palm tree alongside, remains the iconic place of relaxation on any Caribbean island.

In the century following their discovery by Columbus in 1503, the Cayman Islands were infrequently visited by shipwrecked mariners, escapees from war, or transatlantic voyagers taking on turtle for the journey back to Europe. Even in those earliest times, Cayman offered the idyllic timeout from the strife of war or a secluded place to careen the ship in the North Sound. Visits were short and, for those who did not stay onboard ship while in Cayman waters, thatched cabanas crudely framed with fallen branches and draped with palm fronds would provide sufficient and temporary shade to the visitor.

It wasn't until Cromwell took Jamaica in 1655 that the islands became inhabited. Cayman was considered a strategic outpost, where turtle were abundant and would provide "relish to the seaman's diet" including the navies based in Port Royal.

No. 2: The Wattle and Daub Cottage

Cayman's wattle and daub cottage is as indigenous as turtle and thatch rope and represents the establishment of a permanent population from mid-18th to mid-19th Century.



PHOTO BY JOHN DOAK

From 1734-41 England offered 1,000-acre grants of land in West Bay, George Town, Prospect, Bodden Town, and East End as encouragement to settle and populate the Cayman Islands. Ten servants were included along with instructions on how to build dwellings that were to become known as wattle and daub cottages.



PHOTO BY JOHN DOAK

With an established permanent population, the homes were built ever stronger and longer lasting. The wattle and daub cottage construction method developed during the late-18th/early-19th Century, but remained the authentically indigenous house-type being built entirely from local materials. The walls of the rectangular house are framed from hardwood, particularly a species known as ironwood, that once grew abundantly on Grand Cayman. Between the wall posts, a basketweave of cabbagewood wattles was woven. This acted as a reinforcing mesh for the lime plaster that was then applied to form the exterior walls. The lime for the plaster was made by burning down coral in a large circular kiln that would be made right on the beach from rocks and tree branches. In the earliest days, the floors were finished in a lime daub over macademized rocks, but as mill-sawn timber became available or was salvaged from wrecked ships, the floors were framed in wood and elevated above the ground. This helped keep out insects, storm water, and allowed the cooling breezes to circulate freely. Roofs were originally thatched with the abundant thrinax argentea palm fronds that grew across the islands. In the later part of the 19th Century, wood shingles replaced the thatch. Windows were simple openings in the walls with wooden shutters.

No. 3: The Wood Boarded Cabin

Cayman's cabin represents the heyday of shipbuilding, craftsmanship, and the Industrial Revolution period.

From the 1800s to the mid-19th Century, the local turtle grounds were becoming exhausted from overfishing. Caymanians began to construct larger boats and sought turtle in the Bay Islands or Cuba to the north. Others joined the merchant marine and relocated to the United States.



PHOTO BY JOHN DOAK



PHOTO BY VICKI L. LEGGE

The cabin came about in the late 19th Century during the period known as the Industrial Revolution when factories in the U.S. produced miles of pre-cut lumber. During this time, Caymanian seamen were offshore on extended trips so they would bring back the pre-fabricated components to the islands. The rectangular houses were about the same size as the wattle cottages but set above the ground, framed up very quickly using 2x4 timber, and finished on the outside with ship-lap boarding. Zinc sheeting was used to roof the houses. Porches and roofs were elaborately decorated with trimmings, coining the term “gingerbreading.” During this era, and with the availability of appliances, kitchens and bathrooms would be built within the house. The verandah became a universal feature on the front of the house where neighbors would visit and catch up on island news – now known locally as marl road gossip.

No. 4: Pedro St. James

I had the pleasure of being a part of the Pedro St. James restoration project in the 1990s and designed the visitor center there. After years of research and building around the original 18th-Century stone walls of the central tower, the three-storey building serves as a fitting testament to the pioneering spirit that prevails through all periods of Cayman’s development history.

As the “birthplace of democracy” for the islands, the building once served as the meeting place for the first official governing administrators and vestrymen. In later years following a spate of fires, the building has been used as a hostelry and private residence. While the appearance of the original building is not visually recorded, restoration experts combined oral history and the architecture of the Governor’s House in English

Harbour, Antigua, as an inspiration for the building we see today at Pedro St. James.

No. 5: Bungalows and Upstairs House

The bungalow style reached Cayman in the post-war “roaring” 1920s, comprising a free-formed ranch-style home. Unlike its cabin and cottage predecessors, it is completely asymmetrical in its layout. The homeowner could have rooms wherever he wanted them – no two houses were the same. The distinctive features of the bungalow are a shallower roof slope, wide roof overhangs, and a squarish porch on the front of the house flanked by two oversized columns.

The Upstairs House is essentially a two-storey version of the bungalow or cabin or cottage. These homes were built by the George Town merchant families around the turn of the 20th Century. Dr. Roy McTaggart’s house was one such splendid home located on the corner of Boilers Road and South Church Street. Plans for the home are rumored to have been bought from a Sears Roebuck catalog. The house was built in the 1920s entirely of milled timber and commanded a view over George Town harbor for more than 60 years before being unpopularity demolished.

No. 6: Concrete Block Building

Since the time when concrete blocks began to be mass produced 40 years ago by the Flowers family, fewer and fewer homes are now built with timber. Nowadays we see a profusion of bungalow and sprawling ranch houses being built, in a myriad of exterior design styles – a reflection of the multi-international eclectic mix of today’s island residents.



DRAWING BY JOHN DOAK

In the 1930s under the guidance and inspiration of Commissioner Cardinal, various government buildings including town halls and schools were built in each district of Grand Cayman. Using precast concrete blocks made on island, Captain Rayal Bodden and Roland Bodden built many of the town halls and churches – some from plans provided by the colonial office. Masterworks include Elmslie Memorial Church (above) and the George Town Post Office, both buildings having magnificent hammer beam framed wood ceilings, described by some as having the appearance of the upturned hulls of the schooners that the Boddens constructed in the family shipyard on North Church Street.

No. 7: Tourism

Characterized by small boutique hotels and a seaplane service, tourism developed in the ’50s and ’60s for discerning adventurers and divers who

PHOTO BY VICKI L. LEGGE



found Cayman's pristine waters and underwater landscapes to be the best on the planet.

The construction of the Owen Roberts International Airport and Cayman's status as a tax haven provided global reach opportunities and culminated in an era of unbridled development and expatriate population growth in the 1970s through 1990s.

In the 1980s and 1990s, three-storey condominiums popped up along the entire length of what was essentially seagrass-covered Seven Mile Beach land.

Hyatt Britannia was the first major five-storey resort hotel and included a golf course, condominiums, beach suites, and offered such luxuries as Sunday brunch for the locals. The buildings were designed in a distinctively British colonial style which became the popular style of most homes built from the 1990s to the present day.

As the new millennium opened, so did the seven-storey Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman resort, golf course, and residences which form an imposing impression at the northern end of Seven Mile Beach.

Concurrent with the Ritz-Carlton is the redevelopment of Seven Mile Beach condominiums built in the 1970s and '80s where developers and original owners are joint venturing in seven-storey replacement structures.



No. 8: Banking and Commerce

The other pillar of Cayman's economy is banking and finance. Resulting from the 1980s-'90s growth in that sector, law and accounting firms, and offshore insurance companies experienced enormous growth to the extent that the downtown George Town area expanded beyond its five-storey capacity and overspilled Mary Street and Shedden Road.

Described as Cayman's version of Miami's Brickell Avenue, Elgin Avenue became home to a line-up of banking institutions including Cayman National and UBS. The new offices of law firm Walkers will shortly open there for business along with government's mega-size office building.

No. 9: New Town – Camana Bay

Situated on 500 acres stretching from the Caribbean Sea on the west to the North Sound at the east, Camana Bay is a whole new town built mid-

way between West Bay and George Town and, with its own shops, restaurants, offices, homes, and a school, is described by its developer as a place to live, work, and play. A mixed-use master-planned community, the town of Camana Bay will be developed over several decades, enabling it to flourish for generations to come.

Designed by a team of award-winning architects and planners, Camana Bay has a contemporary style inspired by traditional Caribbean architecture and is landscaped with mature, native plants and trees.



No. 10: Hurricane Ivan – New Directions for the Future

I considered a number of buildings for the Number 10 spot, but it seemed appropriate that this article needed to finish with an event that represented some paradigm change in thinking or heralded in a new era.

Hurricane Ivan was such an event being a minimum Category 3 or 4 storm that passed over the islands in September 2004 causing damage to more than 80 percent of the buildings.

Ivan destroyed many examples of the islands' historic buildings but it also sowed the seeds for a new generation of buildings. For local architects and developers, it was a wake-up call and a major influence on design thinking and building construction solutions.

I began designing one such house pre-Ivan and almost totally reconfigured it after the storm (above). It is a pavilioned home, proportioned with respect to Cayman architectural traditions, set in a landscape of endemic plants, atop sacrificial basement accommodations, and anticipated to be clear above the next anticipated flood. The house is fully automated, engineered to be hurricane wind resistant and storm surge safe while generators, "green" gizmos, and plans for photovoltaic collectors will contribute towards a self-sufficient and sustainable solution for the future. •

John Doak is an architect and imagineer who has practiced in Grand Cayman since his arrival in 1979. Built examples of his work are spread throughout the Caribbean region. His signature-styled buildings are inspired by the people, the culture, and the natural environment of their siting. For more information, contact John Doak at doak@johndoak.com