



# JAMAICA TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

# Social and public architecture in Kingston, Jamaica

■ JACQUIANN LAWTON

**There are circumstances that site modernism. Events such as the Great International Exhibit of 1891 launched the trademark of Jamaica as a partner in celebrating industrialization with the world's bastions of exhibition pavilions. Natural disasters have made demands on inhabitants to recover and re-structure living since 1692.**

THE IMPACT of World War II on cultural identity and historicism had its peripheral effects. In the West Indies it nurtured an ideology of self-governance and the spirit of independent nations, a West Indian Federation. These interstitial nodes locate stations of modernity. A modern architecture emerged most visibly in Kingston and St Andrew, the legislative seat and cultural depository of Jamaica.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF KINGSTON'S PLAN discloses the figure of a key. It is a structural figure in the morphology of the city (*fig. 1*). It traces the events of the 1907 earthquake, consequent fire and city renovation thereafter. The city center was then connected to Spanish Town (the former capital) by railway and an internal motorized tram serviced the John Geoff grid (1693) on the north-south streets, where telephone and electrical power generation were operational. Post 1907 building codes were revised. Of significance was the use of stone and cement in lieu of bricks as building materials. By mandate of the Kingston Council, all public departments were moved from the water's

edge, Harbour Street, and internalized on the North-South primary artery of King Street (*fig. 2*). The city's theater located at North Parade (the end of King Street) was rebuilt as the Ward Theatre (1912).

THE FORMAL PROPERTIES of these significant civic structures (attributed to contractors Henriques Brothers) are distinctive. The public departments' greco-roman arched colonnades are severe in their repetition and reduction of ornamentation, whereas the Ward Theatre's façade is symmetrical and eclectic in ornament, as emphasized by the arched and oval treatment of its openings. The public departments' imagery, shared with other colonial structures of that time like the Commander in chief Residence, New Delhi, India,<sup>1</sup> points to architectural production as an instrument of the colonial office. In addition, from 1907 through to the 1950s, the sign of the master builder is inconspicuous in its signification as inventor of predisposing universal formal laws.

## SOCIAL AGENDA 1940s-1950s

The Central Housing Authority (CHA) was formed in 1937 to address deteriorating housing in Kingston metropolitan area and gained legislative support with the Slum Clearance and Housing Law of 1939. The majority of projects were located in western Kingston along the line of approach from rural Jamaica by railway and the Spanish Town Road. Squatter settlements in Trench Town, Dung Hill and Back-O-Wall, Kingston Pen were in existence since the 1920s. The program's schemes included the provision of rental housing, tenement blocks of multi family units with one and two room apartments,

Fig. 1. Kingston, 1967



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shared communal service areas and detached cottages.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, private production of single-family dwellings occurred in St Andrew East Central. They were of a standard rectilinear typology, L shaped, with a public volume (verandah) at the corner, set on a plinth for air flow beneath, with hip and/or gable roofs. Of interest is the systemization of typological determinants and material properties of combined concrete block walls (150 mm) and concrete nog (75 mm).

THE KINGSTON AND ST ANDREW Corporation has on file numerous built and un-built approval submissions, variations of the theme with examples like Repole, Sanguinetti and Co Ransford Avenue, Lyndhurst Park, for P. G. Serrart, 1936.

In 1951 the hurricane Charlie relief fund, implemented through the Hurricane Housing Organization (HHO), increased the urgency of the CHA agenda. Solutions took the shape of site subdivisions with roadways and a basic shell unit. These communities were located in Port Royal, east and western Kingston. The parcels of land designated for relief housing varied in scale from 6.5 to 42 and 75 acres respectively and with densities at 14–20 lots per acre.<sup>3</sup>

THE PREMISES OF THESE SCHEMES were self-help with a small grant for materials and a nominal charge for rent with the right to purchase the lot once infrastructure was installed. The scheme was managed by the Ministry of Housing.<sup>4</sup>

Formally, the pattern of modules were generated from a core unit of 10x10 for Tower Hill and 24x20 for Balmagie in western Kingston. They were bungalow-like with gable or hip roofs and assumed the disposition of cottages in timber (Tower Hill). Land area for cultivating gardens and livestock remained consistent with rural/urban living rituals.

BETWEEN 1948 AND 1952, the Jamaica Manufacturers Association licensed the Caribbean Cement Company to build a factory at Rockfort, the entry to Kingston from the east and Palisadoes airport (built during World War II for the British army) (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> Recovery from the hurricane placed heavy demand on production.

The Housing Act of 1955 created the Department of Housing and Social Welfare, a merger of HHO and CHA. The act, amended in 1958, set provisions

Fig. 2. Government Buildings, King Street



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Fig. 3. UWI campus and Queen's Way

for private capital, financing construction to extend the portfolio of state housing to the middle-income intra-urban migrants.<sup>6</sup>

THE MONA HEIGHTS 1958 SCHEME was built within 200 acres that were originally designated for the West Indian Federation. The fabrication is a system of ribbed pre-cast reinforced panels erected on site. Following suit were the major developments of Harbour View (1960), Duhaney Park (1963), Hughenden (1967), Edgewater (1970) (fig. 7). The single-family dwellings or 'Jamaican Bungalow' were now pre-fabricated for mass consumption; industrialized in a horizontal settlement.

Sanitization policies within the inner city squatter communities continued with four story blocks of flats in western Kingston (Trench Town and Tivoli), but production of the vertical type was limited.<sup>7</sup> Housing strategies continued in the envelope of the Ministry of Housing that replaced the Department of Housing and Social Welfare in 1966. It wasn't until the 1970s with the McIntyre Lands Development (architects, design collaborative) in eastern Kingston that a viable solution of an aggregate of public and private spaces found a livable equilibrium in a low-rise clustering plan.

SINCE 1947, the Office of the Town Planner (the post of Town Planning Adviser consequently becoming the Government Town Planner) was instrumental as the government's adviser in activities relating to housing and land use. The Town Planning Department carried out extensive island wide mappings of population and land use data. However, the integrated use of this data with housing policies was disjointed. What was purposeful was the department's development of the first ten-year

strategic plan for physical development with emphasis on coastal towns and the urban development plan for a conduit connecting the suburbs of Spanish Town with Kingston.<sup>8</sup> The urban development of open public areas, park and beach facilities was also implemented.<sup>9</sup> Planning adviser David Spruell, town planner Graham Charles (Bill) Hodges (1952–1967) and Jamaican architect Carl Chen are of relevance.

DURING THE 1940s the University College of the West Indies (UCWI) Mona campus, Papine, was being conceived as the single tertiary education institution in the region that would fulfill the needs of the West Indies. Medicine for public health was of priority. British architects Norman and Dawbarn were commissioned for the campus design in 1946 (fig. 3). A ring road was central to the planning of the university's administrative functions and circulation distribution to

The displacement of function in relation to building type in the transposition of the rum store to chapel, notwithstanding classical attributes of the structure, is modernist in operation. Yet, memory resides in the planning. The central spine, Queen's way, which was planned as two parallel avenues whose ends were to connect the Senate House with an amphitheater embedded in Long Mountain recalls the procession of Ephesus. The Senate House, and the Registry, Library and Arts buildings within the ring road were completed by 1953 (fig. 5). The programmatic components are extensions of the ring's diameter without the panoptic guise of Ledoux's ideal city. The buildings are simple rectangular sections that exaggerate lines and are suspended between sky and earth on pilotis. Facades are mosaic skins of breather block modules or brise-soleils that are integrated within a post and beam system, yet appear free in their homogeneity. The Arts buildings are in principle rows of

Fig. 4. Kingston harbor and Palisadoes airport



Fig. 5. University of the West Indies, part of Registry building

the greater campus. It was sited West of Gibraltar camp, World War II barracks constructed by the Public Works Department as a safe haven for evacuees of Gibraltar and Malta (1940–1941). The camp buildings were the first temporary home of the university.<sup>10</sup>

THE RING interrupts an aqueduct which serviced the Hope Estate from Hope River during its period of sugar production. The fragmented aqueduct is a colonnade of continuous arches that ends in the campus as a chapel, located perpendicular to the processional entry. "Resident Engineer Ainsworth David Haughton Scott (A. D. Scott, 1912–2004, Jamaican) 'painstakingly pulled down, numbered and transported to Mona the cut limestone blocks of an eighteenth century rum-store from Hampden Estate in Trelawny,' as historian Douglas Hall recorded."<sup>11</sup>

load bearing walls that appear as bookends. The walls are individually cut limestone with irregular mortar joints. They are tactile and hand crafted.

The work presents an ideal of naturalism driven climatically and a synthesis of the artisan and industrialized labor. A modern classicism concerned with equilibrium.

As Dawbarn wrote in a newspaper article of 1947 quoted by Francis Brown: "by logical and sympathetic appreciation of local and current conditions; by a reasoned simplicity enhanced by local arts married to blue skies and luxuriant vegetation."

#### PRE / POST INDEPENDENCE 1950s - 1970s

During the transitional pre-independence decade the private practices of Wilson Chong, Harold J. Ashwell and



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Fig. 6. **M. F. Campbell** and **R. A. Brandon**, Public Works Department, Commissioner of Income Tax Department, recently painted blue

Mc Morris Sibley Robinson were established. Contractors were still creating the majority of buildings in Jamaica. Early practices strategically offered design and building services, as was the case with Wilson Chong and engineers Leonard Chang and Mc Morris Sibley Robinson and contractors Marley and Plant, however short lived the relationships might have been. Alternately, local architects who were foreign trained practiced within the Public Works Department (PWD). The PWD was the government's architectural firm, with the responsibility of all government building other than the Ministry of Transportation's facilities.

WILSON CHONG (1922–1984) epitomizes the spirit of the age. Of Chinese-Jamaican descent, born in Santiago, Cuba, he studied at the University of Notre-Dame and at the University of Illinois (1952). He was able to realize a co-existence of handicraft and industry. He invented a hand pile bore (1967) that was granted U.S., British and German patents in 1971. He ingeniously embraced the lyrical potential of pre-stressed, reinforced and pre-cast concrete building technology. His National Stadium (1960–1962) triumphed as the emblem for nurturing the collective spirit. Its gothic grandstand of concrete vaults from cantilevered beams on a tripod base is empathetic with the plastic limits of the material (fig. 8).

HE ELEVATED the concrete block module to wall panel. In the Henriques Building at Cross Roads, it appears as the residual template of fretwork: a cubist scaffold, tethered by the building's corners, which rises beyond the wall inducing vertical extension of post and panel system (fig. 9). He used it also as kit component for prefabricated low resource housing units: ribbed, pre-cast

walls. A formal affinity for shell structures is evident in the Presbyterian church (Mona), Oxford pharmacy, and the Texaco service stations. International attributes appear in the works of the Ministry of Education seemingly inspired by Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation and the brutalism of the Central Sorting Offices.

THE WORKS, sited throughout the limits of Kingston and St Andrew, were constructed primarily during the 1970s decade and point to an ideology not solely concerned with the materials' monolithic and system building contingencies. As a member of the Society of Architects (1957), Chong forged the establishment of conditional guidelines for practice: engagement, fee scales and conduct codes as well as laws governing the Registration of Architects. In 1979, he was made Commander of the Order of Distinction by the Government of Jamaica.

V. R. Mc Morris and J. P. Sibley started practice in 1955, later joined by H. W. Robinson in 1958.



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Fig. 7. Harbor view housing scheme

Mc MORRIS, SIBLEY AND ROBINSON (MSR) graduated from the University of Manitoba and McGill University, architecture schools in Canada. Their studio was the mentoring forum for generations of Jamaicans who studied externally and returned home to practice, including the first female architect Verma Panton (McGill University, 1964). Members of the partnership also lobbied the Commonwealth Association of Architects on behalf of the Society of Architects for a regional school to be sited in Jamaica. The Bahamas was the alternative location being considered. At the time Canada was the primary CAA delegate of the Americas and architect Norris Mitchell of Grenada was the representative for the Caribbean. The school was realized in 1988.



Fig. 8. **Wilson Chong**,  
National Stadium



Fig. 9. **Wilson Chong**,  
Henriques Building

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF MSR captured the spirit of a new Kingston, with repetitive façades of urban anonymity celebrated in concrete. Construction method varied. In the example of Scotia Bank Center located on the Kingston waterfront both in situ and pre-cast concrete components were utilized. MSR were also identified as associate architects for multinational corporations with foreign architects investing capital through regional offices in Kingston, for buildings such as the British-American building (1967), now Victoria Mutual, New Kingston.

The linguistic expression of the group varied, appearing ambiguous with the expressionistic works of the UCWI Creative Arts Center (1969) and the Matalon Residence (1970), St Andrew East (fig. 10). What prevails is a structural rationalism, hinging on building method and material technology.

ARCHITECTURE PRODUCTION since 1958 has in essence debated the limits of a materialist based rationalism. The objects of Marvin Goodman and Associates are sensitive to tropical climatic themes most evident at a private residential scale, with the exception of the Petroleum Corporation of Jamaica office building (New Kingston). The dialectic extreme of H. D. Repolé's monolithic office towers integrates public concern with the implementation of livable streetscapes in New Kingston. Works of Patrick Stanigar in East Kingston (Harbour Street) reveal an organic bridge towards naturalism.

PROPOSALS between 1957 and 1970 for the expansion of the business and industrial facilities geographically confined Kingston's administrative limits to St Andrew north east (New Kingston) and pushed port facilities further west (Newport west). This made way for the super block redevelopment of the Kingston waterfront and placed the Urban Development Corporation Act of 1968 and its vehicle the Urban Development Corporation (UDC) at the center stage of development plans. Initially the UDC only worked in designated areas: rural tourism towns such as Ocho Rios, Negril, Montego Bay. The first appointed chief architect was British architect David Gregory Jones, of Shankland and Cox, who assisted in the establishment of the UDC.

DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY Kingston is state driven as a result of the management of capital since the 1970s. High-rise housing is on the social agenda again, utilizing defunct models of modernisms past. Numerous proposals for the revitalization of Kingston have been guided by the UDC. In its capacity as member of a committee or board, it provides technical support and coordinates consultants both local and foreign. Initiatives include: Vision 20/20, the Kingston Restoration Company, and the Kingston City Center Investment Company

(KCCIC). The master builders' obsession with style persists and embodies a resilient entrepreneurial history. Between 1998 and 2002, the National Stadium was renovated in two phases by the Urban Development Corporation (project managers and consultants) as part of a joint agreement between the Government of Jamaica and the Venezuelan Government.<sup>12</sup>

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**NOTES**

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Fig. 11. **Mc Morris, Sibley and Robinson,** Turtle Beach Apartments, Ocho Rios



Fig. 10. **Mc Morris, Sibley and Robinson,** UWIC Creative Arts Center, 1969



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