Introduction

This is an attempt to identify the influences that the enslaved people coming from West Africa had on the historical architecture of the United States Virgin Islands (formerly the Danish West Indies). There are several connections between West Africa and the former Danish West Indies as related to architecture that will be discussed. As educators we do not always include the African/African-Caribbean perspective in the teaching of historical architecture. The findings of this research should provide beneficial information for educators.

Traditionally the teaching of historical architecture has focused on European influences. But what about the African influences? If one looks through a high school and/or college housing textbook, one does not see the African influences as related to architectural styles found either in the United States or in the United States Virgin Islands (former Danish West Indies).

Whose Perspective?

Housing educators usually teach from a European perspective. What about teaching from an African perspective? Many persons believe that the first black people to come to the Caribbean were the enslaved people which the Europeans brought to work for the plantation industry (Johnson 1995). Ivan Van Sertima in his book, They Came Before Columbus, provides facts that Black people were in the Caribbean long before the arrival of the Spaniards. The Spanish had sighted African settlements and artifacts in the Caribbean but did not report these findings (Van Sertima 1976). However, oral history lives on and also the archaeological diggings are showing evidence that there were African people in this region of the world long before the Europeans arrived. Therefore, it is important to teach from an African perspective as well as a European perspective when teaching about historical architectural styles.

Review of Literature

What are the connections between Africa and the Caribbean? The first connection is that the Danes brought enslaved people from West Africa to the Caribbean. Second there is a connection between the historical forts found both in Ghana and the Danish West Indies. The third connection is the cultural impact that the West African people had on the historical architecture of the Caribbean.

Enslaved People. After the year 1600, most of the African people who were coming to the Caribbean were the result of the slave trade which was being conducted in the islands. The people from the following tribes were brought to the Danish West Indies (U.S.V.I.) as of May 1661: Mandinga, Kanga, Loango, Congo, Amina, Kassenti, Fida, Papaa, Ibo, Bibi, Karabaie, Watje, Selungo, and Fulah (Paiewonsky 1989). "The Danes worked closely with Fetus and other neighboring tribes such as the Akwamee and the Akim Tribes," (Paiewonsky 1989:92). Paiewonsky continues to cite that the Accra, Dahommey, Ashanti, Sherbros, Fellatahs and Bambarras were the tribes which were in great demand because they were more willing to work and they were strong. Africans from the Mandingo tribe were noted for their quickness to adjust to a new situation and learn a skill and they made excellent craftsmen and artisans (Paiewonsky 1989).

"A Moravian missionary C. G. A. Oldendrop who visited the Danish islands in 1767 and 1769 said he observed larger numbers of people from the following tribes: Fulaini, Maandingoes, Amina, Akims, Popos, Ibos, and Yorubas." The tribes came from a large geographical area which extends from the Senegal River to the Bight of Benin (Hall 1992:70-71). The backbone of the Caribbean is and has always been the African culture. Much of the hard work and cultural heritage which is so much a part of the West African people is reflected in the Caribbean
historical architecture of the Danish West Indies (presently U.S.V.I.).

Forts. Another connection between Africa and the Caribbean are the forts. "Through studying the forts, we will be able to look at historical, geographical and architectural legacies of the African people who, in conjunction with the Danish, created the present-day society of the United States Virgin Islands." (Edge 1994:16). Edge goes on to say that, "Danish forts in both Ghana and the Virgin islands provides us with insight into the triangular system of trade as it was established between Europe and Africa, linking the Virgin Islands. The West Indian and Guinea Company built forts in Ghana on the Gold Coast. The African captives sent to the Virgin Islands came from areas of Ghana near the Danish forts."

(Edge 1994:16-17). The Danes occupied a fort at Ningo between 1735 and 1850. Ningo is located between Accra the present day capital of Ghana and the mouth of the Volta River (Briggs, 2000, p.162). Osa Castle (Christiansbourg Castle) located in present day Accra was built by the Danes in 1661 (Briggs 2000:15). Two other Danish forts were Fort Kongensted at Ada at the mouth of the Volta and Fort Prindsensted at Keta. Keta is located on the southern coastline of Ghana between the mouth of the Volta and the country of Togo (Anquandah 1999:11). The West Africans who came to the Danish West Indies represented persons from all walks of life: architects, teachers, engineers, craftsmen, doctors, farmers, etc. The next section of this paper will show influences that West Africans have made on the historical architecture of the Danish West Indies. These influences include construction methods and social-cultural relationships.

Cultural influences on the historical architecture: construction methods

Wattle and Daub. What were the cultural influences on the historical architecture of the Danish West Indies (U.S.V.I.) as related to the Black African culture? The first houses that the Africans built were made of wattle and daub construction. Until the end of the 18th century the houses which the Africans lived in were designed by African people. At the time of this writing there are only two wattle and daub houses left in the U.S.V.I. and they are found on the island of St. John. They were rectangular in shape; usually the length was twice as long as the width of the house. This same pattern was also found in Africa (Johnson 1995). The researcher observed wattle and daub construction of houses during fieldwork in Ghana in July 2000 and May 2002.

Jahann Jakob Bossard, in A Caribbean Mission, gives this account of African housing. "The house rests on four stakes which are driven into the ground. The stakes are fork-shaped at the top end and spaced in such a manner as to form a square. A few vertical stakes are placed between the four corner posts and pliable branches are woven among these. The branches are covered with quicklime and plastered with cow dung" (Bossard 1987:221). The braided twigs are called wattle.

The wattle and daub construction can be traced to the Ika district on the Niger River located in West Africa (Sobel 1987). An interesting comment that author John Vlach makes is that, "One of the little understood dimensions of the American culture has been the material contribution of the Afro-American. The material achievements of the Blacks are generally assumed to have been negligible, if not nonexistent" (Vlach 1976:47). This statement can also be applied to the Danish West Indies and to that of the Afro-Caribbean culture. The more the Black culture is studied the more one is aware of the "Black" creativity and the existence of an Afro-American or Afro-Caribbean material culture (Vlach 1976). Other references also describe the construction of a wattle and daub house: Ulsamer-Harrison 1992; Jackson 1990; Righter 1991). Wattle and daub construction was known to both the Africans and the Europeans. However, an interesting note is that the type of basket weaving which was done on the wattle and daub houses in the Caribbean was more characteristic of those that were constructed in Africa than those which were constructed in Europe (Johnson 1995). Prussin cites that, "the traditional building wall is made of wattle and daub." This is the traditional housing for the Ashanti, Baule, Ibo, Urhobo and Yoruba tribes (Prussin 1974:187).

Rubble Construction. Another contribution made by the Africans was rubble masonry construction. This method was known to them in their native land. The reason this method of construction was used in some areas of Africa as well as in the Caribbean is that some of the stone was not conducive for
trimming and cutting (Prussin 1974). A close look at rubble walls found on the historical buildings in the Danish West Indies, shows the use of red brick, Blue Bitch (a local rock found on St. Thomas), yellow brick and other stones. The rubble walls or “rubbed up” were made by placing stones in a trench which marks where the foundation is for the building. Then mortar is placed between and around the rocks and the stones (Johnson 1995). Rubble construction is also used for foundations of houses in the rural areas of the Volta Region of Ghana. The Volta Region of Ghana is where the Danes took the enslaved people to the Caribbean.

The Africans knew how to take sea shells and grind them into a lime-like substance and then mix this with earth to form a hard cement-like impervious surface which was added to earthen walls (Prussin 1974). The people from the Niger, Oti, Volta and Bani rivers of Africa are the ones who practiced this construction method. If one looks carefully at the mortar construction as found in the United States Virgin Islands, one is able to see this type of construction.

**Cutting Stone.** The art of cutting stone is another contribution which the people from West Africa gave to the Caribbean architecture. This art had been mastered by the Africans tens of thousands of years ago (Beazley 1988). Many of the plantation buildings were made from cut stone as well as other buildings found throughout the islands. There is a lot of stone work found on the warehouses in the downtown area of St. Thomas. Many of the plantation buildings especially Reef Bay Plantation and Annaberg Plantation on the island of St. John are good examples of cut stone work.

**Tabby Construction.** The West Africans also knew about tabby construction which is a cross-cultural influence seen in the historical architecture. “This method of construction was known and used by the Spanish, Europeans, and Africans. However, Africans generally are not included in textbooks as one of the original cultures who used this construction method,” (Johnson 1998:59). This method makes use of a cement-like mixture comprised of sea shells, lime, water, and stone applied over a wooden frame that has been filled with stones. The tabby is made by pouring the masonry mixture and small stones and shells into a wood mold. The exterior walls are then plastered.

**Cistern.** How and where did the idea of the cistern as we know it in the Danish West Indies come from? Information on where the idea of the cistern originally developed, as far as a cultural influence, has been hard to obtain. Denyer cites that "In Yorubaland, Benin, which is located in West Africa, the houses were built around a courtyard. The rainwater ran down the corner groins of the roof and was channeled into large water pots. Although sometimes a more elaborate system of underground storage tanks were used," (Denyer 1978:95-96). This researcher observed the collection of rain water in a gutter-type system in which the water ran into a concrete cistern at the Paramount Chiefs Palace at Peki Blengo in the Volta Region of Ghana.

In Africa, towns located "away from rivers and streams, every compound had from three to twelve artificial subterranean tanks covered with timber and earth. Each tank had small holes for water to run in and to be taken out," (Denyer 1978:95-96). This could be a connection between West African culture and the cistern system which developed in the Danish West Indies for the collection of rain water. Currently research is being conducted on cistern fields located in Saakpuli. Saakpuli is located in the Savelugu-Nanton district of Northern Ghana. Saakpuli had a slave market (Okoro 2002:2,5). Slaves were used in constructing wells and cisterns in Salaga (Okoro 2002:4). To this day the cistern is the main method of collecting water for the United States Virgin Islands (former Danish West Indies).

**Front Porch/Gallery or Verandah.** One of the most important architectural features of a Caribbean house is the gallery. Stanley D. Dodge states that, "the gallery or the porch may well be the legend that the slaves brought from the tropical rain forest to the Caribbean." He goes on to state that, "Architectural historians have overlooked the historical precedents for the verandah. They have assumed that early European colonists invented it in response to the Caribbean climate," (Dodge 1923:12-13). However, the verandah is widespread in the indigenous architecture of the West African rain forest. The verandah is important in the social and the ceremonial life of the extended African family. The verandah is well suited to the Caribbean climate because it offers shade from the hot sun and it encourages the flow of cool breezes. An interesting point which Dodge brings out is that an eighteenth century etching shows the King of Dahomey, West Africa, entertaining slave trad-
ers on the palace verandah. This piece of art work shows that many early European traders in Africa could have been influenced by African architecture (Dodge 1923)

Social and cultural relationships

The way houses are grouped together provides us with a guide to the social and cultural relationships found within a society. Courtyards are used to group houses in parts of West Africa. This open area brings the people together. This is one of the most interesting types of houses found at Benin, which is a region of West Africa. Benin is one of the main artistic and cultural centers of West Africa. Traditionally the houses of the Benin chiefs had rooms arranged around a series of courtyards (Foyle 1995).

The grouping of houses around a central courtyard was observed by this researcher in the Volta Region of Ghana. The Africans grouped their houses together when they first arrived in the Caribbean. The method in which the Africans grouped their houses was a reflection of their cultural context and the importance of the group and the interrelationships of group members. The idea of social integration and working in harmony together is important in the high-context culture a theory of Edward T. Hall. One does not sense this in a European community (low-context culture) where people seem to keep their distance from their neighbors.

This cultural reflection is cited in Susan Denyer’s book titled African Traditional Architecture. Denyer says that “the architecture in Africa was a personal adaptation of a group solution. The houses built by a particular society were in a style which had been communally worked over several generations and it was tailored to meet the peoples’ needs.” When this researcher asked various compound chiefs and tribal leaders what determined the design and/or the layout of the buildings as found in the rural Volta area of Ghana, they replied that it had been handed down generation after generation. “In all societies kinship was an important determinant of structure of the settlement pattern, which was usually expressed by physical nearness” (Denyer 1978:4,8). In the African villages, structures were not conceived as a group of buildings, but as a group of people. The African villages are an expression of the group of people who live in them. “Villages and houses were built around people and not groupings” (Denyer 1978:19).

Sometimes the villages were laid out symbolically. Denyer cites an example of this, “In what is now Mali, the village people based their philosophy on the idea of germinating cells vibrating along a spiral path to break out of a world egg. Each village was laid out either in a square to represent the first field cultivated by man or an oval with a hole at one end to represent the world egg” (Denyer 1978: 19-20).

The organization or the grouping of buildings is many times a reflection of one’s culture. In the Danish West Indies the West Africans built their first houses on the plantations around a yard. Later on this is how their long row houses in the Savan area of St. Thomas were grouped. Savan is an area where the “free colored” lived. Most of the people living in Savan were craftsmen or worked on the docks (Woods 1994). Caribbean African houses built around the “Big Yard” is an influence coming from the African philosophy. The houses which were grouped around the “Big Yard” were very small and they were used mainly for storage, sleeping and to get out of bad weather. The “Big Yard” was used by all of the families living around it as the place for socialization, raising children, cooking and eating, washing clothing, etc. In Africa the compound always had a sacred tree located within the yard area. “In Savan ‘Big Yards’ did not have a sacred tree as such, but there was always a fruit tree which was very important”. These were the words of Felipe Ayala who grew up in Savan and is an active member of the Historical Trust Society on the island of St. Thomas (December 1994).

Conclusions

As educators, if we are going to teach from a non-European perspective and meet the needs of all of our students, then we must know something about the historical architecture of non-European groups of people who came to live in the former Danish West Indies (U.S.V.I.) and the United States mainland. There are still many unanswered questions about the contributions that the West African people have made in the Caribbean. Traditionally, the West African culture has been an oral culture and not a written culture, which has made it more difficult for educators and researchers to gain access to the contributions of the African-Caribbean people.
Other reasons that make this research difficult to answer questions as related to the West African contributions to the historical architecture of the Caribbean are as follows: (1) documents have not been available on traditional African construction methods (Johnson 1998); (2) Europeans tried to strip the Africans of their traditional culture; and (3) careful records were not kept or they were destroyed. It becomes difficult to trace back to the historical architectural influences which the Africans have contributed to the Caribbean.

What is clear is that the three former Danish West Indian islands would not have all the beautiful historical buildings that they have today, if it had not been for the labor and hard work of the West African craftsmen. Their contributions are found on plantation buildings, warehouses, churches, forts, castles, townhouses and vernacular houses that are still in existence today. The connection between West Africa and the Caribbean is reflected in the historical architecture as found in the Caribbean islands.

Implications

Traditionally, African culture has been an oral culture which has made it more difficult for educators to obtain the contributions made by this culture, unless the particular educator has conducted personal research. As educators, we need to research and take a closer look at the African cultural influences that have made an impact on the development of architectural styles as found within the United States Virgin Islands and the United States mainland. There are many unanswered questions about the extent of contributions from the African people as related to architectural styles found in the “Western World.” Houses play an important role between man and his world. Housing is a powerful way of revealing one’s culture and aesthetic beliefs. African Americans have played an important role in the shaping of architectural traditions of this country and the U.S.V.I. during their formative years. Further research is needed to identify the West African tribes that developed the “Big Yards.” More research is needed on the development of the cistern in the Caribbean and the cultural influences as related to that development.

References

Anquandah, J.
1999  

Beazley, M., editor
1988  

Bossard, J. J.
1987  

Denyer, S.
1978  

Dodge, S. D.
1923  

Edge, W.
1994  
*Historical Forts of the V.I.* *The Virgin Islands Daily News* 16-17 (February 25).

Foyle, A. M.
1959  

Hall, E. T.
1976  
*Beyond Culture.* New York: Doubleday.

Hall, N. A. T.
1992  
Jackson, M. D.

Johnson, C. L.


Okoro, J. A.

Paiewonsky, I.

Prussin, L.

Righer, E.

Sobel, M.

Ulsamer-Harrison, D.

Vlach, J. M.

Van Sertima, I.

Woods, E.
1994 Savaneros. St. Thomas: Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Division for Archaeology and Historic Preservation.