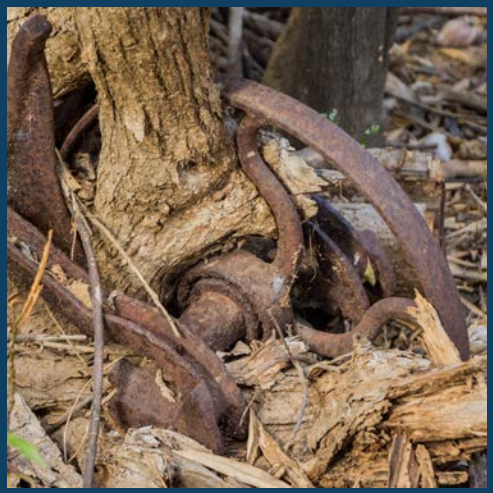
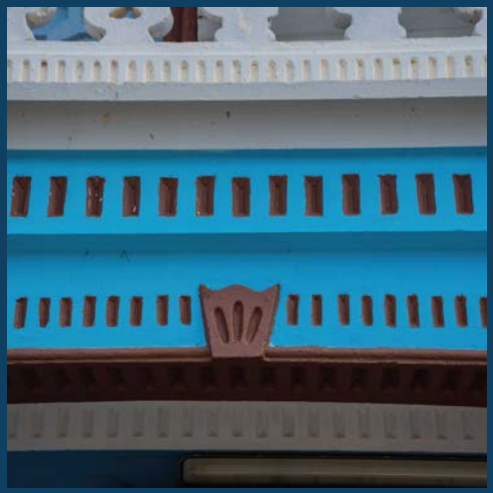
Making and Building on St. Martin

an Amuseum Companion

People have been making and building things on the island of St. Martin for thousands of years. This book takes you on a journey through time to discover more, from the prehistoric days to the present!

THE MOHO STONE
Ancient faces in French Quarter

Where the last houses give way to the slope of the central hills in French Quarter, there is a stone with many faces. It is called the Moho stone, and it was named after a nearby well. It is the most elaborate prehistoric stone carving on the island.

Stone carvings, also called petroglyphs, are found all over the Caribbean. In some ways, they are more mysterious than other archaeological remains. Some artifacts can be dated by radiometric analysis.

In prehistoric times, Amerindians living on St. Martin used the cupules in the Moho stone to polish stone tools and perhaps to grind grain or pound roots.

For example, radiocarbon dating can be done on wood and bone. But the Moho stone existed long before it was carved, so there's no way to directly measure the age of the carvings.

The Moho stone is 2.5 meters long and 1 meter wide. Its largest features are three deep holes on the top of the stone. Holes like these are called cupules by archeologists. Prehistoric Amerindians made them for polishing stone tools. They could hold sand or other grit as an abrasive for polishing.

Cupules could also hold water, which would have helped toolmakers keep the tools they were polishing from overheating. In most cases, stones like this are found near water. Perhaps at one time a stream always ran beside the Moho stone. The early Amerindian residents of this area may also have used the cupules as mortars for pounding or grinding roots or seeds. We can imagine them around the stone, crafting useful tools and making food for their families.

The Moho stone clearly had practical uses, but was it also art? Did it have cultural or spiritual meaning to the people who carved it? The answer is almost surely yes. The three large cupules are arranged in a pattern common to many stone carvings that represents the eyes and mouth of a human face. The stone also features many additional faces and designs.

On the most densely populated island in the Caribbean, this stone is a reminder that all the roads and buildings are a very recent development. All of St. Martin's recorded history is just a short time, and people were here long before that. The Moho stone is a rock of ages, and you can stand beside it today to consider its epic past, and the people who were part of it.

Many simple faces are carved into the Moho stone. These decorations tell us that the stone was more than just a place to make tools.

Amerindian people made conch shells into many kinds of tools. Items made from conch and other shells were very durable. They have survived thousands of years. Will any tool you own today last that long?

5,000 YEARS OF ECO
Reusing and recycling on St. Martin

St. Martin has a deep history of reusing and recycling. In fact, it stretches all the way back to prehistory. Visit a local archaeological site and you can see the evidence. Conch shells were made into a variety of tools: axes, scrapers, awls and more. This may be first the example of reusing a "single-use food container" on St. Martin.

Bakers wear aprons made from cloth flour sacks on the island of Saba. Flour sack clothing was also common on St. Martin. (Photo courtesy of Will Johnson.)

During the colonial era, St. Martin was a remote outpost. Goods arrived slowly by boat and nothing went to waste. Metalwork was done by hand-powered forge so St. Martiners could make their own nails and horseshoes. Old or broken items could be melted down to make new things.

In the early 20th century, there were few jobs on the island. Money was scarce, but people were resilient and creative. Some St. Martiners living today remember wearing clothing made from cloth flour sacks. In an interview, Delphine David explained that her mother "used to take the flour bag, wash it good, put it in the sun and let the sun draw out the marks…she would take that bag and measure us and crochet right around, tie our waist with a string and that would be our outfit."

There was recycling in the kitchen, with graters made by hammering holes in a tin can. Even today, on the docks you can see fish scalers made from bottle caps nailed into a wooden handle. Perhaps the most iconic example of Caribbean recycling is the steel pan drum. It transforms waste into art.

A new handle extends the life of an old tool. Metal tools were precious, and worth saving as long as possible. Metal would often outlast wood in the tropical climate. New wood handles would be made for metal tools. Metal hinges and other hardware would be reused when they outlasted wooden storm shutters or doors.

This is the blower for a forge, found in the backyard of The Old House. St. Martiners had to make and repair metal objects themselves because it would take a long time to order and ship items from abroad. Being able to work metal also mean they could reuse old metal to make new things.

Glass bottles were reused over and over. Some were protected, as seen here, so they would last longer. Large glass bottles called demijohns were often used to create liqueurs or punches. Rum was combined with fruit and left to infuse for weeks or months. Punch made from guavaberry fruit is a traditional Christmas treat on St. Martin. Beauperthuy Punch, named after the family that lived at The Old House, was made with lime peel.

The steelpan may be the most elegant recycling of all time. A common item—a steel drum—is transformed into a musical instrument by hammering and stretching the metal into areas that produce different notes. The instrument was developed in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1930s. The pure tones of the steelpan quickly became popular throughout the region. Pan music is one of the most unique and treasured parts of Caribbean culture. (Photo courtesy of Will Johnson.)

STONE WALLS
Local history alive with nature

In almost any view of St. Martin, you will see stone walls dividing the landscape. These walls were built from stones taken when land was cleared for farming. They marked property boundaries and fenced in fields and livestock. For over a century, they were built by enslaved people. Today, many people still call them “slave walls”.

Stone walls provide habitat for many local animals. Anoles are called tree lizards, but they are also happy to live on stone walls.

These walls are built from stones stacked upon each other with no mortar, but they have survived for hundreds of years. The design is very strong and stable. They have lasted through hurricanes and earthquakes. They survive flooding because water can pass through.

Unlike many things made by people, these walls are a valuable natural habitat. They are made of natural stone and have many places where animals can hide or lay their eggs. The walls provide shade during the day, and the stones retain the warmth of the sun at night.

The Bearded Anole lives only on St. Martin. It needs shade to survive the tropical heat, and is often seen on stone walls.

Plants that don't need much soil find a place to grow on stone walls. In shady areas, mosses and ferns grow on them. In sunny places, lichens, vines and cacti make stone walls their home. Without stone walls, many of these slow-growing plants would be covered up by grass or other plants.

Stone walls are an important part of St. Martin's history and its natural landscape. They are some of the oldest structures still standing on the island, and they are alive with local plants and animals.

Plants like cactus can live on stone walls because they need little soil. Without stone walls, they can be smothered by faster-growing plants.

Flowering vines climb rock walls to get sunlight. The Heartleaf Amazonvine, also known as Wiss, covers many walls and provides food for insects like the caterpillar of the Long-tailed Skipper butterfly.

Stone walls can stop brush fires from spreading. This gives animals a place to live and eat while the burned areas grow back.

Caribbean Cool

How The Old House beats the heat

Traditional Caribbean houses were designed to stay cool in the tropical heat. In the past, there was no air conditioning, so builders used wind, shade and stone to make houses cool. The location of a home, the direction it faced, and what was built around it could all make a difference. There were also many design elements that kept houses cool. You can see them at The Old House in French Quarter, a historic St. Martin building where Amuseum Naturalis is located.

The Old House was built with a massive stone foundation, which dates from at least 1766. This keeps the floor dry and protected in storms or floods. It also keeps the house cool. The foundation acts as a *thermal mass*, absorbing the heat from the house.

The Old House is designed with windows and doors across from each other, so wind can blow through the house. This design can have ten times the air flow compared to a window on only one side. The windows are at human height so people can enjoy the cooling breeze.

Windows were made with louvers—slats of wood that can be tilted. These allowed air to pass, while still providing shade. People in the house could change the angle of the louvers to direct the incoming breeze where they wanted it.

High ceilings give hot air space to rise, leaving it cooler below. Openings between rooms allow air to flow throughout the house in any direction. The kitchen was not part of the main house, so the heat from cooking fires was not near the living space.

THE MYSTERY MACHINE

As volunteers cleared the back yard at The Old House, they discovered this mystery machine. Over the years, a tree had grown up through it. This antique cast iron machine has several visible features. The exposed wheel near the trail is a flywheel, which stores energy to run the machine. The enclosed part opens in a bell shape, where something would have come in or out. Parts of the words “Lancaster” and “Champion” can be read in the iron. Head to the internet and see if you can figure out what this machine is!

BUILT HERE
Local styles and traditions

On St. Martin, Hurricane Irma tore off roofs and damaged many houses. But pretty soon, the air was filled with the sounds of hammers and saws as the rebuilding process began. Still, many homes remain damaged and open to the elements. Without repairs, the rain and tropical sun will bring them beyond the point of fixing.

Decorative concrete blocks in countless designs can be seen on St. Martin. Built into a wall, they provide privacy and shade, while allowing air flow.

Many homes on St. Martin feature cement tiles made in Suckergarden in the 1960s and 1970s by brothers Cameron, Louis and Stevanus Guy. Often the artists and craftsmen behind St. Martin's style go unrecognized.

Take a closer look at St. Martin homes. Whether they were built 200 years ago, or only 50, they reflect unique Caribbean architecture, design and construction traditions. They're the legacy of St. Martin designers and builders who have never been recognized. They are also a big part of the special look of the island.

Most houses on the island are one of a kind, from the overall design to details like railings and arches. A wide variety of materials were crafted right here by hand, including tiles, concrete and woodwork.

Often, homes reflect the local environment. Large foundations—like the one The Old House sits on—help keep homes cool. Concrete roofs became popular after the devastation of Hurricane Donna in 1960.

How will Hurricane Irma change the face of St. Martin? Will we lose many fine examples of local design? Will we design new homes differently? Only time will tell.

Intricate wooden gingerbreading is a beautiful detail on many local houses. For most of the island's history, this was carved by hand.

Contrasting colors of paint highlight details in columns and other artistic concrete work.

This book was developed as a companion to Amuseum Naturalis, St. Martin's free museum of nature, heritage and culture. The Amuseum, and this book, were created by Les Fruits de Mer.

Les Fruits de Mer is a non-profit association based in St. Martin whose core mission is to raise awareness about nature, culture, and heritage. The organization carries out this mission through a free museum, publications, films, and public events. Learn more at at lesfruitsdemer.com and amuseumnaturalis.com.

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