

I have just finished reading a report* dealing with a subject of mounting interest to all citizens and of particular interest to architects. This report by Blair Associates deals with the preservation of individual buildings of architectural or historical merit in the city of Willemstad. It also considers the problem of the area-wide character of that city and of the Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao on which it is located. Several years ago Blair Associates completed a much larger and more comprehensive report on the Capitol Hill District of Providence, Rhode Island. That report which dealt with the preservation and development of the city's historical districts, is one of the handsomest area studies that I have ever seen.

While the present report on Willemstad is smaller in scope and intent, it nonetheless is well worth the required time to study its suggestions for they might well apply to similar problems here in New Mexico.

The city of Willemstad was first viewed from the appearance it now presents to the tourist and then its economic potentials were examined in terms of increased tourist business and expanded trade and industry. The report recognizes the Island's distinctive architectural character as a real asset for future economic development.

The urgent need to prevent further loss of valuable examples of Willemstad's architectural heritage is pointed out. Many of the older buildings in the principal tourist sections have had their street-level facades altered to the point of now having no architectural character even though the upper stories retain their original charming contours. Other architectural assets are being permitted to waste away. Thus a "bold and competent preservation and redevelopment plan for Willemstad should be undertaken."

While pointing out the value of individual buildings, the report stresses the need for the consideration of whole areas:

"In a large sense it is the relation of one building to another, the grouping and contrasting of structures along a street or around a square, and the contrast of one street when compared to another that creates in the visitor's mind the true image of distinctive character."

The report explains in some detail the objectives to be achieved by the establishment of historical district regulations. These objectives are summarized as:

- a. "Preventing further deterioration, despoilation and destruction of those important structures still standing;
- b. "Encouraging repairs and renovation of important structures to be carried out in the style and spirit of the original designs;
- c. "Guiding the design of new structures or the renovation of existing less important structures in the historical areas so that they will be in harmony with the historical structures and enhance the basic character of the area;
- d. "Retaining the over-all atmosphere, spirit and uniqueness of the entire community which depends upon the related grouping of buildings rather than upon individual structures."

The Blair report next outlines the regulations

needed to achieve these goals. Here I should like to quote from the report at some length as I feel that the suggestions outlined have much bearing upon our problems in this area. New Mexican readers will note that in contrast to Willemstad, the existing ordinances governing the Old Town Plaza area of Albuquerque and the Historical District of Santa Fe call for all new structures to copy predetermined styles but do little to prevent the loss of buildings of architectural value. If this report's suggestions are carried out such a mistake would be avoided in Willemstad.

"RULES AND GUIDES. Specific rules and guides can go a large part of the way in preserving important structures and the character of the historic district. There is some common ground in which judgments of style can be made. When reviewing past styles of architecture, there are available classifications, studies and descriptions of the orders or components of any particular architectural style. Thus, judgment of changes in older buildings which are to retain their style is relatively easy if a capable and learned architectural historian is available to make or assist in judgments under the regulations.

"The real problem, however, arises in the judgment of contemporary styles when compared to the old. As a general policy in drafting regulations, it is suggested that the important examples of architectural styles of the past be scrupulously protected from change. On the other hand, it is recommended that new buildings or renovations of unimportant older buildings be encouraged to be designed in contemporary style, but with materials, proportions, textures and colors that complement rather than conflict with the neighboring structures. In this way, the character of the community can be preserved, yet the growth and life of the island of today and of future generations can be reflected in architecture which will take its place side by side with that reflecting the life and times of the past.

"We have given consideration to the desirability of a specific listing of materials, design elements and proportions for new structures in the historic district, but we are fearful that strict application of such a list of rules might result in sterile and uninspired facades which catch the letter but not the spirit of the rules. As guides, however, new structures should retain the stucco, wood trim and tile roof color combination which is characteristic of all of the present styles in the historic district. Cornice heights should be set comparable to the principal existing ones for each street facade, but the administrative official or board should be authorized to vary these when necessary to permit the introduction of a major new bold form into the area.

"THE IMPORTANCE OF JUDGMENT. No matter how specific the guides are spelled out in regulations, the achievement of the most desirable results will depend on the person or persons entrusted with the administration of the regulations. This is particularly true of the judgment of con-

*The *DISTINCTIVE ARCHITECTURE OF WILLEMSTAD*, a report prepared by J. Stanton Robbins and Lachlan F. Blair; Blair Associates, Providence, Rhode Island, August, 1961.

temporary styles related to the old. In matters of architectural design, it is obvious that quite often the judgment of good or bad is dependent upon personal taste.

"In the United States historical district regulations are usually administered by a commission composed of from three to many persons of widely varied background. This is a typical method of interpreting regulations in America, but it is our experience that the effectiveness of regulations is often severely weakened because of this diffusion of responsibility. Important structures and architectural monuments have been lost because members of these commissions have been ignorant of the purposes of the law or lacked knowledge of architecture and history, or yielded to political considerations.

"Administration of these regulations is equally as important as the structural requirements and the standards for design of a building. This point can not be overstressed. For this reason it is strongly recommended that great care be exercised in selecting the persons to be concerned with administering the historic area controls. Ideally such persons should be well educated in the architectural history of Curacao as well as in contemporary styles. It is further to be hoped that such persons be dedicated by natural inclination to the preservation and protection of the architecture and culture of Curacao. The administrative procedures and guides for judging new plans can be spelled out in the regulations, but without such people in charge, the job will not be done."

The importance of the inclusion of a definite architectural inventory of each building in the historical areas as an integral part of the regulations is stressed. The report also suggests four categories for rating the relative importance of each building, ranging from "outstanding"—buildings which should be preserved at all costs—to "bad." It is envisioned that both private and government funds be used for acquiring buildings on the "outstanding" list.

Furthermore a "visual plan" or "design plan" is called for which should cover the historical areas of Willemstad. Such a plan would serve as a guide both to preservation and development. It should set forth a framework of proposals for action to enhance the form and to preserve the character of the area. This plan, of course, must be based upon the realities of economic possibilities.

Additional suggestions for building public support and providing interest includes such items as plaques, tourist trails with explanatory booklets, exhibits and the introduction of additional attractions within the historical district such as a museum, art galleries and a top-flight restaurant.

I should like to conclude with one additional paragraph from the report which I think sums up the philosophy of Blair Associates.

"... Preservation will work best if it is carried on hand in hand with building for the future. This is what makes the city a *living* museum; not just a collection of unused old buildings, but a place where people, conscious of their heritage, nevertheless create new forms to meet changing times. Only when they view the past in relation to the present and future can they learn to use old buildings for modern purposes,

and to create new ones so as to enhance, rather than detract from the distinctive character of the city."

—John P. Conron

INTERNATIONAL DESIGN CONFERENCE

Environment is the complex, often paradoxical aggregate of the physical, biological and social factors which influence us from conception to death—the totality of our experience. We can leave one environment, but only for another environment—perhaps similar to, perhaps drastically different from the one we left. But even the one we left will influence us in our new environment.

Environment is never static. It is changing continually. It modifies us and we modify it. With shortsightedness and stupidity, we sometimes have changed it for the worse—witness our ugly, congested cities and denuded, erosion-scarred landscapes. With courage, intelligence and vision, we have often changed it for better, both aesthetically and functionally.

The International Design Conference in Aspen in its first eleven years has skirted, touched on, referred to environment in considering areas of designs and aesthetics. The 1962 Conference will make environment the central theme—the focus of all discussion, debate and study.

A singular gathering of outstanding authorities in many different fields from the United States and other countries will explore and relate environment to almost all areas of our lives.

The 1962 Aspen Conference will run from Sunday, June 24 to Saturday, June 30. For further information refer to: John Conron, Box 935, Santa Fe, N. M.

ARCHITECTS ASSOCIATED

Three Santa Fe architectural firms have formed a collaborative under the name of Architects Associated. The firms: John P. Conron—David deR. Lent

Robert Plettenberg

Phillippe Register

The first project: To provide a comprehensive development plan for the New Mexico State Capitol.

These firms will continue to practice under their own names as individuals. The collaborative, however, has been formed to provide a wide range of backgrounds and talents for the undertaking of projects of the largest scope.

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