

# PRESERVATION GUIDELINE 15

Division for Archaeology and Historic Preservation  
Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources

## NEW BUILDINGS IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The design of new buildings for historic districts is a complex and long-debated problem. Historic districts are rarely "frozen" places; periodic changes are inevitable and anticipated. The main concern is that new buildings relate, in terms of massing or scale, height, setback, and materials to the majority of existing historic buildings and, especially, to buildings on adjacent sites.

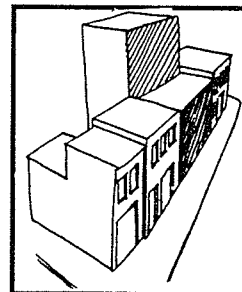
ings, or setbacks for upper stories. In some instances, higher stories should be relegated to the rear of lots to avoid changes in elevation along principal streets.



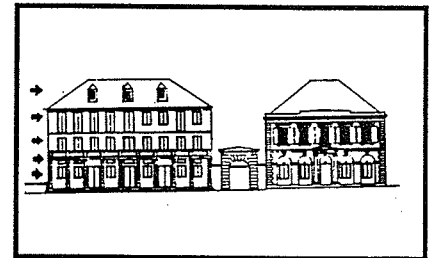
New buildings should respect the character and overall qualities of older buildings in historic districts.

### Height

New buildings must conform with current Virgin Islands code regulations for maximum heights in specific zoning areas. In addition, new buildings in historic districts should conform with heights of surrounding structures, and not stand out as significantly higher (or lower). Steps should be taken to relate divisions marking stories to those of adjacent buildings. Windows, string courses (decorative molding), and cornices should be designed to match adjacent examples. If additional stories are necessary, various means of "masking" the difference should be explored, such as two stories sharing common window open-



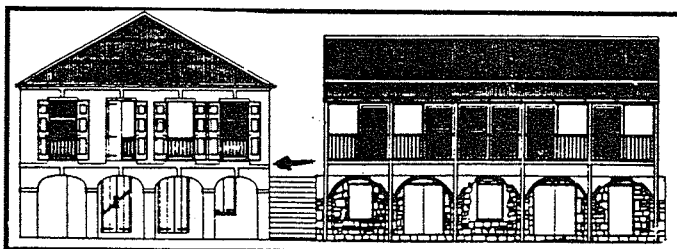
Consider relegating additional stories to the rear of lots in order to preserve uniform streetscapes.



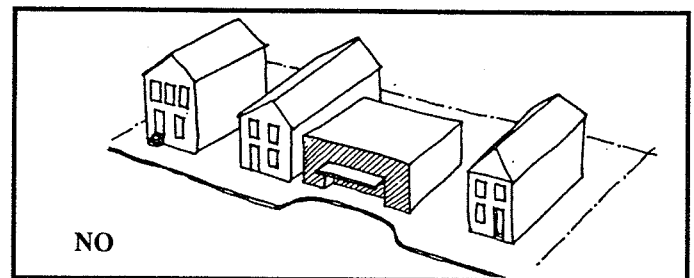
Additional stories can sometimes be "compressed" into conformity with existing elevations. This hypothetical building (based on a now demolished earlier structure) compresses five stories into a height only slightly greater than the 2-story building adjacent to it.



New buildings should reflect the height, massing, and overall scale of surrounding buildings.



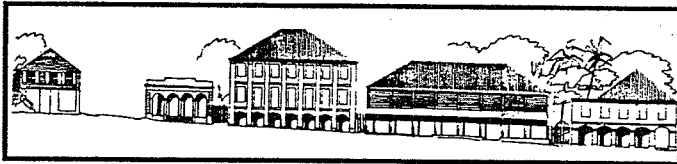
Elements, such as arcades, windows, heights, cornices, moldings, and the rhythm of openings should all be used to integrate the historic buildings into the existing context.



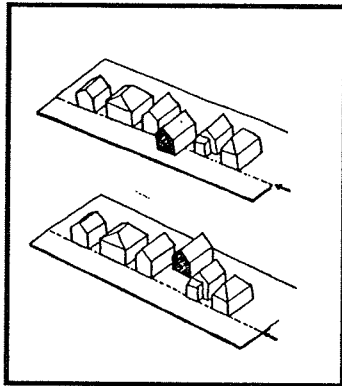
Respect the existing massing, scale, and orientation of existing buildings.

## Massing/Scale

New buildings should have comparable scale and massing to those around them. Enormous, bulky shapes are discouraged. Efforts should be made to break up the plane or facade or larger or longer buildings, in order that they might better relate to the size and scale of adjacent examples.



A new building should respect its overall context. Note the new building.



New buildings should conform to existing setbacks.

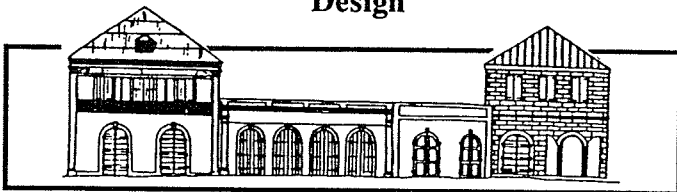
## Setbacks

New buildings must respect the existing setbacks of historic structures. New buildings should not, for example, be recessed if adjacent buildings face directly on the lot line or provide an arcade. Similarly, new buildings should not extend beyond the line created by other buildings on the same street -- nor should they encroach on public rights-of-way.

## Materials/Colors

New buildings should respect the materials and general "textural" qualities of nearby buildings. Smooth or scored stucco, wood siding, corrugated metal, and brick are all common materials in Virgin Islands historic districts. Historic colors are outlined in a separate guideline. For the sake of continuity, every effort should be made to ensure compatibility of materials as well as colors.

## Design



Respect existing colors, textures, and materials. Drawing, Pamela Gosner.

The design of new buildings is probably the most complicated issue. Generally, it is recommended that new buildings respect the overall character of historic examples without directly copying

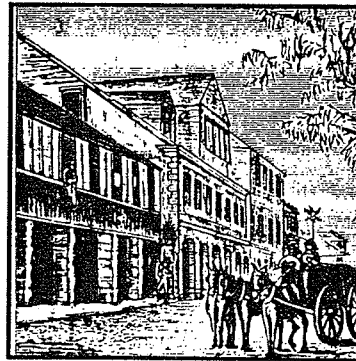


Elements such as the size and placement of windows, the height of the first floor above grade, the roof shape and pitch, and the building's orientation are probably the most important factors to consider when designing new buildings.

ing details. Wall planes, roof form or roof angles, materials, ratios of wall surface to window and door openings, colors, etc. can all be used as starting points for new design. The simple use of arches, hipped roofs, or historic looking shutters alone is not

enough to create a sense of continuity.

In some cases, particularly for modest buildings, more directly imitative designs can be more acceptable. Simple vernacular ("everyday") wood cottages and, especially, wood secondary buildings can often take their lead directly from historic examples.

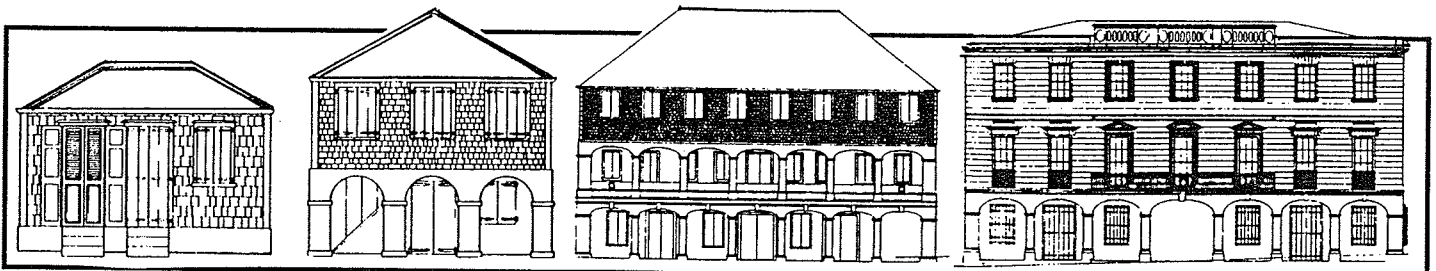


Detailing, however, should be kept plain, and "gingerbread" decoration especially should be avoided.

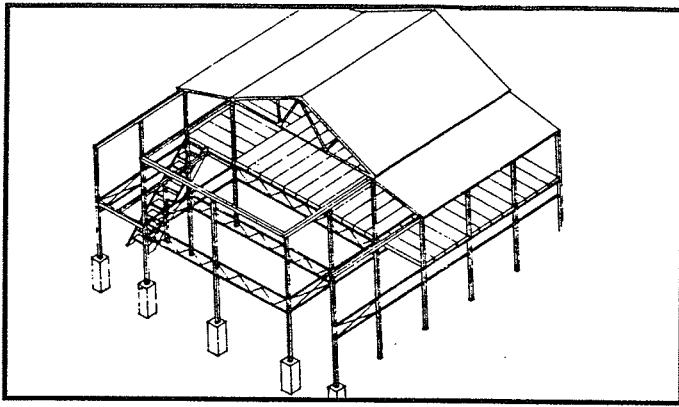
Owners may wish to consider reproductions of missing buildings. Often sufficient documentation exists for reconstruction, as demonstrated by this 19th-century illustration of Strand Street, Frederiksted. While some preservationists might quibble with the practice and concept of reconstruction, the major losses of significant historic buildings in the Virgin Islands can often help justify such as approach.

There is a considerable amount of philosophical basis for even larger new buildings more directly imitating historic examples as well. Reconstructions of known historic buildings is often justified. If newer buildings are intended to imitate older ones, documented recreations can be approved; other designs can be considered, as long as detailing, design, etc. closely conform with known

historic examples. It should be re-emphasized that this practice is can be taken too far, but "historically-replicative" buildings will be considered by the commission. However, half-hearted or "inaccurate" replicative type buildings will not be accepted.



Simple vernacular (everyday) cottages, such as the example on the left, can (and should) be reproduced when smaller structures are called for. Such buildings are ideal for courtyard spaces and perimeter of lots. Similarly, a 2-story vernacular building -- especially when detailing is kept simple--can be justified for in-fill construction. The third example -- the 3-story building, might be justified in special instances. Generally, however, such a building by its very size and bulk would constitute a major addition to any historic district. Alternatives to obviously "replicative" details should be explored before accepting such a design. Finally, reproduction of an obvious "high-style" or fancy building should be avoided -- at least in historic districts. Such a building, which copies in this instance an existing building, would compete with genuinely historic buildings and therefore detract from the overall quality of a historic district.



A "pared-down", modern building such as this can often complement many of the qualities of historic buildings without copying details. Such a solution should often be considered.

buildings or other proposals. If demolition occurs, the building must be documented by drawings and photographs prior to the demolition.

### Architects

Owners wishing to construct new buildings in historic districts are advised to hire trained architects for the preparation of their designs. Drawings and other details are a basic requirement for review.

*For further information contact:*

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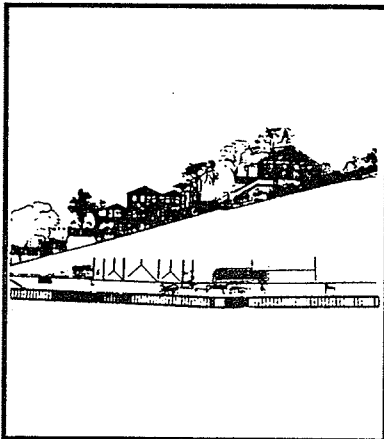
115 Watergut Homes

Christiansted, St. Croix 00820

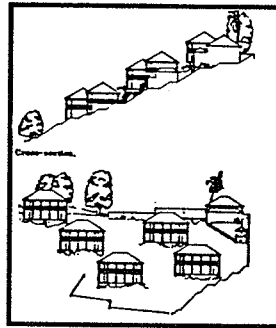
(809)773-7081

Prepared by William Chapman

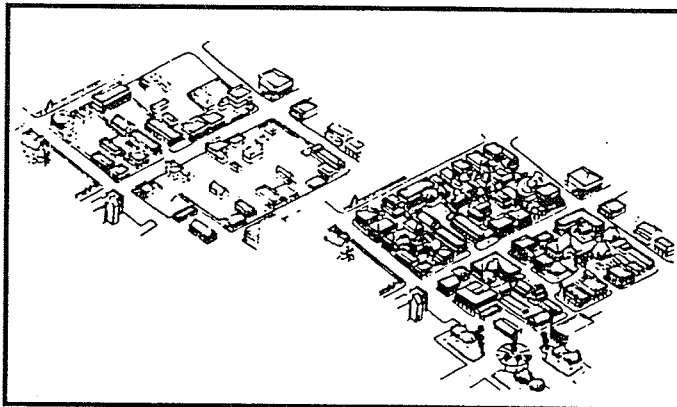
Layout by Jeanne Strong



Hillside sites, as found in Virgin Islands historic districts, require special consideration.



New buildings on hillsides should respect the traditional pattern of development and not "loom" too prominently over the district. These proposed buildings for Government Hill in Charlotte Amalie clearly follow historic precedent in their height, massing, and distribution.



Many parts of historic districts in the Virgin Islands now lack their historic density, as demonstrated by their drawing of the former Hill Street Urban Renewal Area in Frederiksted. New in-fill construction to fill the many gaps in the historic districts, is strongly encouraged by the Historic Preservation Commission.

### Demolition

Demolition of documented historic buildings within historic districts is strongly discouraged by the Commission. In most instances, in fact, demolition is not approvable, unless a strong case can be made for the building's poor physical condition or the impossibility of economic return. All plans for demolition must be accompanied by designs for proposed replacement