

THE PHILPSBURG COURTHOUSE

An Architectural Analysis of the Monument

HOW CAN A COLONIAL BUILDING EXPRESS MONUMENTALITY? A STUDY OF THE PHILIPSBURG COURTHOUSE.

Architectural History Thesis AR2A01 I

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April 2024

Master Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences

*“Between the courthouse and the police precinct house lay a rustic square,
overshadowed by two large flamboyant trees.
As a rule, a police man was sitting on the veranda of the police precinct house,
his chair leaning slightly backwards,
his legs slung over the railings of the veranda
and a pitch helmet on his head”
(Hartog, 1974, p. 40).*

Abstract

Looking at history through the lens of architecture can tell a lot about the lifestyles, technologies, and ideologies of the past. Looking at the past can create a clear connection to the present. It is for this reason, the researcher, will write about the origins of the courthouse of Sint Maarten, the first government building built on the island in the 1700s (Lesterhuis & Oers, 2001). The overall focus of this paper is concentrating on how a building can grow to express monumentality. This paper will discuss the colonial presence of the island and the resulting influence on the island's architecture. The researcher tries to uncover the intricate connections between traditional European architectural styles of the past and their manifestation in Dutch colonial architecture within the West Indies (Van Andel, 1985). The dynamic between the courthouse and its immediate surroundings was analysed to offer a better understanding of the symbiotic relationship between architecture, societal evolution, and urban development (Hartog, 1974). It is believed that the Philipsburg courthouse, expresses monumentality. By exploring its influence on society and its surroundings, a deeper understanding of monumentality will unfold, explaining ways in which monuments contribute to the shaping of collective identity and historical continuity. Investigating the influence of the Philipsburg courthouse has the potential to increase the understanding of how it functions as a social space, as well as offer insights into how architectural elements contribute to monumentality and how this influences local perspectives. It can inform decisions related to the design of public spaces, and the integration of cultural landmarks into urban landscapes. Overall, it contributes to a better appreciation of the role monuments play in shaping the fabric of society.

Keywords: Philipsburg Courthouse, Sint Maarten, monument, West Indian architecture, Dutch colonial architecture

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Introduction

Architecture plays an important role in shaping the built environment. The built environment then plays an important role in shaping the behaviours, interactions, and cultural norms of society, monuments even more so. The people of Sint Maarten are mostly unaware of the cultural history that its architecture holds. Therefore, the public at large may have a delayed response to identifying the impact the monuments and specifically the courthouse may have had on its surrounding environment. Since, to care for one's historical monuments is an evolutionary process. Thus, an underlying goal of this paper is to contribute to the growing knowledge of the significance of monuments on the island. This thesis suggests that colonial monuments contribute to the shaping of collective identity and historical continuity in the West Indies, particularly when local communities form a better understanding of these monuments.

Among all the existing historical buildings on Sint Maarten, the Philipsburg courthouse is the most prominent as it was the predecessor and likely contributed to the island's architectural identity. Built in 1793, the Philipsburg courthouse is a recognizable building on the island. In the book, *Courthouse of St. Maarten: life and work of Dr. Willem Hendrik Rink* (1974), it is described as a symbol of Sint Maarten. The Monument Ordinance of Sint Maarten (1999) defines a monument as: "A movable or immovable object that was made at least 50 years ago and that is considered to be of general interest due to its beauty, artistic value, meaning for science, the nation's history or its value for cultural anthropology." Although this was done, political and community leaders are only now becoming involved. Newspaper articles titled "How to preserve our monuments historical heritage" and "Monument Fund is almost here" from 2020 show there is still much way to go.

Although the courthouse is important to the island and recognized as a monument it is mostly ignored by scholars and seldom mentioned in existing studies on monuments in the Dutch Caribbean. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to highlight the historical, social, and cultural value of the Philipsburg courthouse. Joan van Andel (1985, p. 3) perfectly states:

"...an attempt to draw attention to the architecture of Philipsburg may be a first step to the protection of this architecture....The town possess an architectural inheritance which, even if not comparable either in quality or quantity to that of West-European countries, with their longer history and great wealth, and is none the less valuable in itself and of great historical and cultural importance."

Aiming to understand a monument's impact on people and its physical environment this paper questions: In what way does the colonial Philipsburg courthouse express monumentality, and how can an examination of this monumentality contribute to a deeper understanding of its symbolism within Sint Maarten's collective identity? This thesis first introduces the

Philipsburg Courthouse in its past glory. To completely understand its nature a brief history of the Dutch presence in Sint Maarten is given. The architecture of the Courthouse and the impacts this has had on the immediate surroundings of C.M Wathey Square are presented. Later the aspect of monumentality is deeply examined to better understand the importance of the courthouse.

Bergsma and Dijkshoorn (1990) have identified four significant periods in Caribbean modern history from the Pioneer period (1625-1675) to the modern period (1945-present). This paper will pay attention to the Plantation period (1675-1850) and the Post-slavery period (1850-1945). Between these two eras the traditional architecture of the West Indies is said to have been developed. The Philipsburg courthouse itself was built during the Plantation period and the renovation that gave it its current characteristics was done in the post-slavery period.

The paper consists of an academic and a practical component. The courthouse will be studied, looking at specific architectural characteristics that make it monumental. For this, literature was collected. Secondly, observations of historical maps, paintings, historical descriptions, plans, and recollections of the courthouse will be used to better understand its influence.



Figure A. The Philipsburg Courthouse

Chapter 1. Sint Maarten's colonial past and the emergence of the courthouse

1.1 Dutch presence in the Caribbean and Sint Maarten

The Dutch came to the new world in hopes of conquering land and in search of spices and other recourses like the other European powers. The battle for salt, which lasted more than sixty years, was most important to the Dutch. It all started with herring. The herring fishery was, as a Dutch saying goes, “the mother of all commerce” (Goslinga, 1971). Salt was needed to preserve the herring, and it was also used in the butter and cheese industry of the country, as well as for preserving food on long voyages.

Dutch colonial society in the Antilles can be separated into two geographically separate groups. The ABC islands of Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire and the SSS islands, Saba, St. Eustatius, and Sint Maarten. The latter group were a convenient halfway point between the Dutch colonies of New Amsterdam, present day New York and New Holland, present day Brazil (Goslinga, 1985). The Dutch first set foot on Sint Maarten in 1631. The Netherlands found the island particularly favourable because of the large salt pans. In that year the population developed into 97 Dutch people, 30 enslaved Africans and one Amerindian. The first settlement was created on the side of Fort Hill between great bay and the great salt pond. A second settlement was then built in the valley of Little bay in 1650 and the first settlement was abandoned (Van Andel, 1985). When John Philips became commander, he managed to have the new capital on the island, the third settlement, named after him- Philipsburg. This new settlement had already begun construction under the previous commander Martinus Meyers (Goslinga, 1985). Although Front Street became the main merchant street it was not used as a busy trading port like that of St. Eustatius (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990). This along with Hartog's and Goslinga's claims of aristocratic disputes between the early families on Sint Maarten suggest that the island was a small community.

The island was constantly under different European rule during the Pioneering and Plantation periods. After years of battle between the French, English, Spanish and Dutch the island was divided between the French and the Dutch in 1648 with the Treaty of Concordia. It states the French and Dutch settlers, respectively, “shall continue in that quarter where they are established at this present” and “shall live as friends and allies.” However, the fight for power would continue until the beginning of the post-slavery period. With the continual change in power there was a sort of Anglicizing process in the 18th century. Most Dutch church services had to eventually be conducted in English (Goslinga, 1985). We can safely assume this not only introduced the English language to the island but also English ideas.



Figure 1. The 'Eendracht' and other ships of the Dutch fleet during the Dutch “golden age” by Willem van de Velde II, 1673.

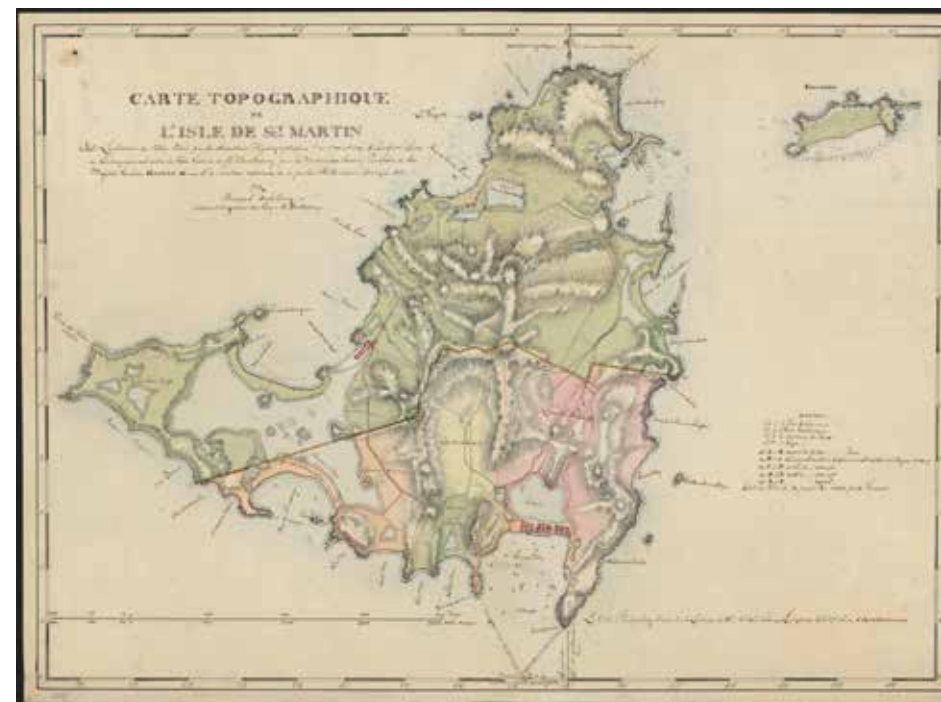


Figure 2. Map of Sint Maarten highlighting the capital of the French-side, Marigot to the north and the capital of the Dutch-side, Philipsburg to the south. Drawn by Samuel Fahlberg, 1817.

1.2 Origins and development of the Philipsburg courthouse

The creation of the Philipsburg courthouse is the result of frustration after years of holding island council meetings on Fort Amsterdam or in private homes. When Governor Dr. Willem Hendrick Rink was appointed in 1790, he made it his first objective to create a building for all governmental activities, three years later the courthouse was completed (Hartog, 1974). Although the building was called the courthouse it operated more as a city hall. The original plans for the building included a government office, a council hall, a weighing house as well as a small prison. Over the years the building also operated as a post office.

In the years preceding 1790, the island accrued substantial profits. Three years before the courthouse the island had 92 plantations, 35 of which were sugar plantations while the others were agricultural or for cattle (Hartog, 1974). From 1789-1792 the island also produced 200,000 barrels of salt yearly (Goslinga, 1985). Despite the island's prosperity, Rink wrote a stern letter to the Dutch West Indian Company requesting the funds for the construction of the building, expressing the island's dire need for a government building, weighing room and prison. However, he began construction without a response. The building cost estimated around Naf. 14,000.00 (€7100.00). Because of the island's financial position, Governor Rink was able to pay all debts beforehand. Rink's decision to initiate construction without waiting for a response demonstrates his determination to fulfil the needs of the island and the absence of immediate external support. This indicates that although the courthouse is a colonial building it was a local endeavour built to better the island.

In 1819 a hurricane and earthquake devastated the island of Sint Maarten. The roof of the courthouse was ripped off, the structure was damaged and the entire first floor was destroyed. Nevertheless, the ground floor was repaired well enough for it to be usable. After five years of laying half desolate a decision was made by the Island council that the population should pay for the renovations. Everyone aged 16-60 was to contribute Naf. 1.65 (approximately Naf. 51.15/€26.15 in 2024). Slave owners were to pay the equivalent for each enslaved person. The remaining was provided by the colonial treasury (Hartog, 1974). In 1826 the courthouse was reinaugurated. This is another example crediting the success of the courthouse to the initiative of the islanders.

Hartog (1974) describes the courthouse as the eyecatcher of Philipsburg (Hartog, 1974). Maps as early as 1878 prove that Great Bay was the main point of entry to the Dutch side even before the establishment of the courthouse; this situation continued through the years. After WWII and job cuts due to the Industrial Revolution, many Sint Maarteners returned to the island from the larger Dutch Caribbean islands of Curacao and Aruba. There was the need to strengthen the economy and tourism was presented as the new industry (Van Andel, 1985). In the early 1900s, large

ships docked in Great Bay and passengers arrived at the C.M Wathey Square on smaller boats. So, anyone who set foot onshore immediately laid eyes on the Courthouse. This imprinted the distinctive image of the courthouse not only on the locals but also to visitors of the island as they formed a connection between the island and the building.

The courthouse began to be pictured everywhere, from postcards, to souvenirs, t-shirts, and number plates. Three postage stamps depicting illustrations of the courthouse were put into circulation in the late 1950s (Hartog, 1974). Postage stamps are generally used to promote a nation's identity within the country and across the globe. This demonstrates the island's initiative to iconify the building.

However, until recent its monumentality was largely ignored. Unlike Sint Maarten, in Curacao a description of the monuments on the island was requested as early as 1913. The Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal Land en Volkenkunde (Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology) also request a list from the other 5 Dutch Caribbean islands. Unfortunately, only St. Eustatius reported any monuments (Romer, 1990). In 1989 the Monument Act was passed in the then Netherlands Antilles, and almost 90 years later The Monument Ordinance of Sint Maarten (1999) was created. However, this was followed with little action. It wasn't until 2005 Sint Maarten recognized its first monuments and the courthouse was granted its monument status in 2008.



Figure 6. Queen Juliana St Maarten stamp, illustrating the Philipsburg Courthouse designed by Harry Disberg, 1958.

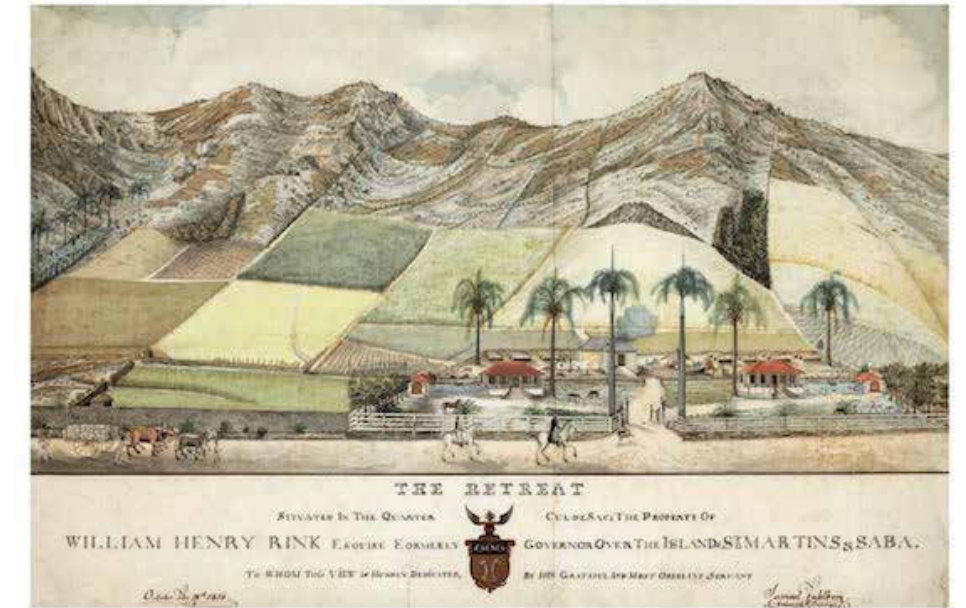


Figure 3. The estate of Governor Willem Henry Rink in Cul-de-Sac on the island of Sint Maarten by Samuel Fahlberg, 1816.



Figure 4. A salt heap in Philipsburg. The courthouse can be seen in the background.



Figure 5. Map of Great Bay and the “landings plaats” (landing site), the harbour where visitors would enter the Dutch side. Drawn by Cornelis Dirks, 1878.

Chapter 2 European influence on the building of the courthouse in the local context

2.1 The development of traditional West Indian architecture: Pioneer Period to Post-slavery Period

The architectural styles across the Caribbean differ widely. The Spanish colonial architectural style of Cuba and the Georgian style of Jamaica are very different. It can safely be assumed that this is due to the influence of the historically dominant colonial power on that island. The Dutch Caribbean Windward islands were occupied by the English, French, and Dutch alternatively and a little less by the Spanish from the beginning of the Pioneers period (1625-1675) until the beginning of the Post-slavery period (1850-1945). Consequently, the architecture on these islands has multiple influences along with those brought by the enslaved Africans and the indentured East-Indians.

Caribbean traditional architecture is said to have been developed between the pioneer and plantation periods. This architecture did not only depend on the ideas and styles of the colonial powers but also on the economy of that country and the physical environment. This includes the knowledge, climate available materials and technologies (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990). Examining Caribbean architecture and the architectural on Sint Maarten is necessary for a complete understanding of the Philipsburg Courthouse, its significance, and its place within the architectural heritage of the region. One of the dominant styles, classicism was introduced during the plantation period in the Windward Islands by wealthy English plantation owners. Books like *The Book of Architecture* by James Gibbs published in 1778 was brought to the Caribbean (just a couple years before the courthouse was built in 1793) and influenced the architecture (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990). Characteristics of classicism like symmetry, equal proportions, durable building materials, columns and front porches combined with available materials and technology developed into the typical architecture in the Windward islands and the Lesser Antilles.

After slavery was abolished, Europe lost interest in the colonies and the architecture on the islands came to a standstill. Now in the Modern period (1945- present) the use of modern materials like concrete is becoming dominant on the islands (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990).

2.2 The development of Sint Maarten traditional Architecture: Pioneer period to Post-Slavery Period

The courthouse was built sixty years after Philipsburg was established and the island had slowly developed its traditional architecture. The courthouse was the first public building on the island and was influenced by the architectural style of the town and might have influenced the subsequent ceremonial buildings.

The first significant architectural remnants on the island are the result of colonialism. Although there is archaeological proof of Amerindian presence on the island dating as far back as 600-1200AD, early maps of the island during the pioneering period show no permanent settlement besides the French settlement in Marigot and the Dutch in Philipsburg. According to the Sint Maarten Heritage Foundation and Museum, we know the Amerindians were nomads, constantly traveling between islands, avoiding other indigenous groups. The Dutch also believed the island to be uninhabited when they arrived (Lesterhuis & Oers, 2001). In comparison to other countries where we see the influence that colonialism had on the traditional architecture, Sint Maarten is a good case study on how European architects of the past adapted for a different climate and terrain and how foreign architectural technologies exist in new environments.

According to Spanish sources in 1631 the houses of the first settlement were made of brickwork, stone, and roof tiles (Van Andel, 1985). These are similar to structures found on other Dutch colonies like New Nederland (present day New York). It can be determined that the Dutch did not take the climate and terrain into consideration. About 100 years later when the third settlement of Philipsburg was founded on May 15th, 1733, the architectural style was very different.

Joan van Andel conducted an intensive study of the domestic architecture on the island. She says the traditional Sint Maarten house has a stone foundation; the rectangular structures are made of wooden frames that are usually one story. On the occasion that the house is two stories tall the ground floor is usually made of stone. The hipped or saddled roofs are covered with shingles and the walls with weathering board. Windows usually have wooden shutters and decorative verandas are a common feature of most private structures. These houses are usually painted in light or bright colours (Van Andel, 1985).

This shift in typology could have been a product of many reasons. The Dutch may have found that their original building type was not suited for the tropical climate. The presence of different European powers on the island could have also swayed the architecture as well as the emergence of new architectural styles in Europe. These styles would later be introduced in the Caribbean and the most prominent style to be introduced on Sint Maarten would be classicism.

When looking at the wider urban scale, the first colonial settlements on Caribbean islands all follow a similar pattern. Organically grown villages were situated near forts for protection and as industry began to grow there was a shift towards town planning (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990).

On Sint Maarten the first two settlements in Fort Hill and Little Bay were under the protection of Fort Amsterdam. Afterwards, Philipsburg was developed under the Protection of Fort Amsterdam and later Fort Pieter. Philipsburg follows a rectilinear rigidity and is divided into rectangular plots. "This system of order was a representation of the Renaissance period which matched the utilitarian viewpoints of the colonizers" (Bergsma & Dijkshoorn, 1990). The division of plots allowed for easy access between the Great Salt Pond where salt was harvested and the waterfront where it was then exported. Front Street was the main merchant street that ran along the coast and parcels more inland between the sea and the salt pond were used for housing. The creation of Philipsburg may have strategic economic reasons. Being closer to the salt pond and the harbour would have made harvesting and exporting salt easier. The town is also on a flat sand ridge and the Dutch may have been more comfortable building on flat land.

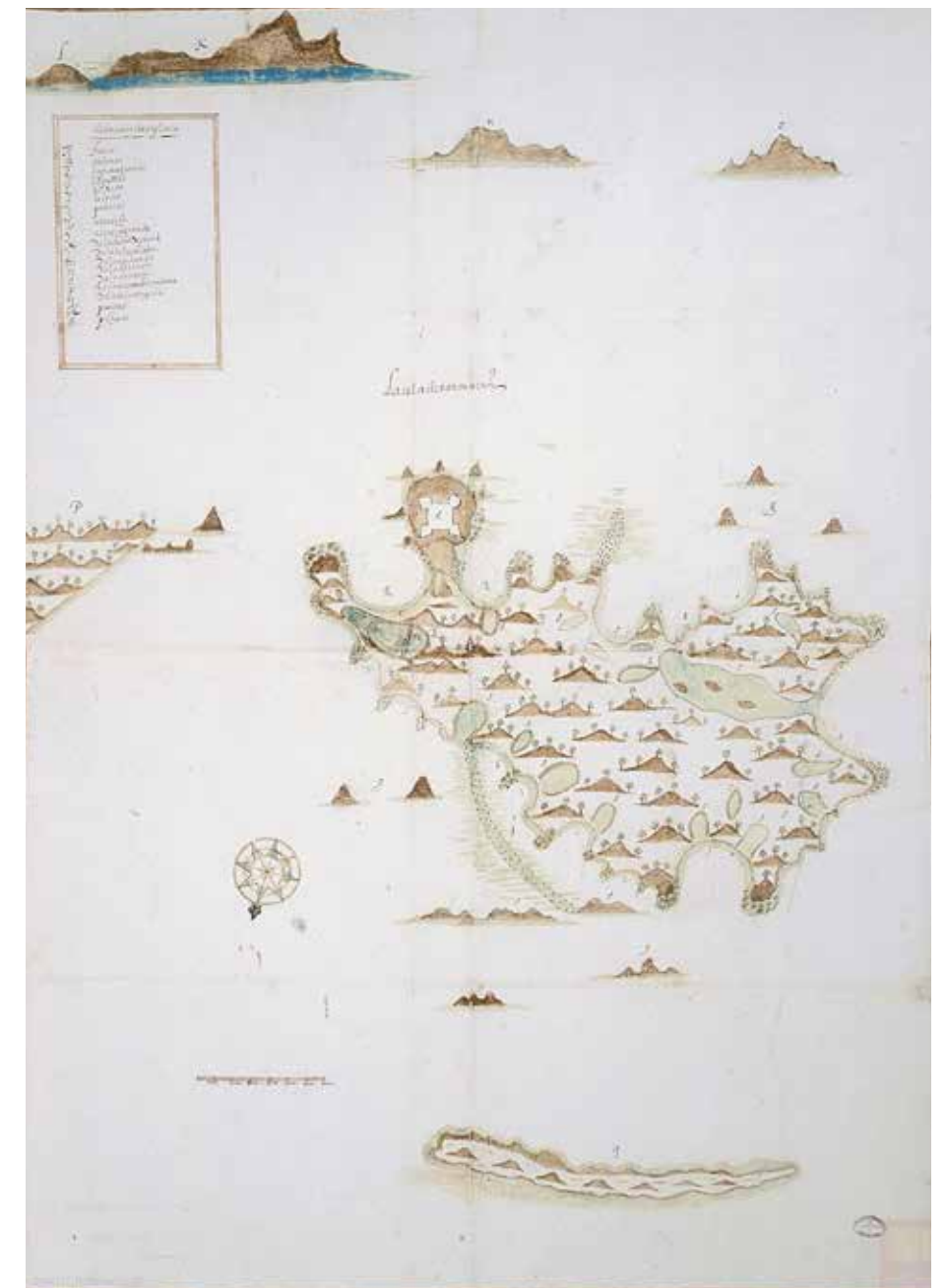


Figure 7. An early map of Sint Maarten where the north arrow is pointed downward. Drawn by the Spanish in 1636.

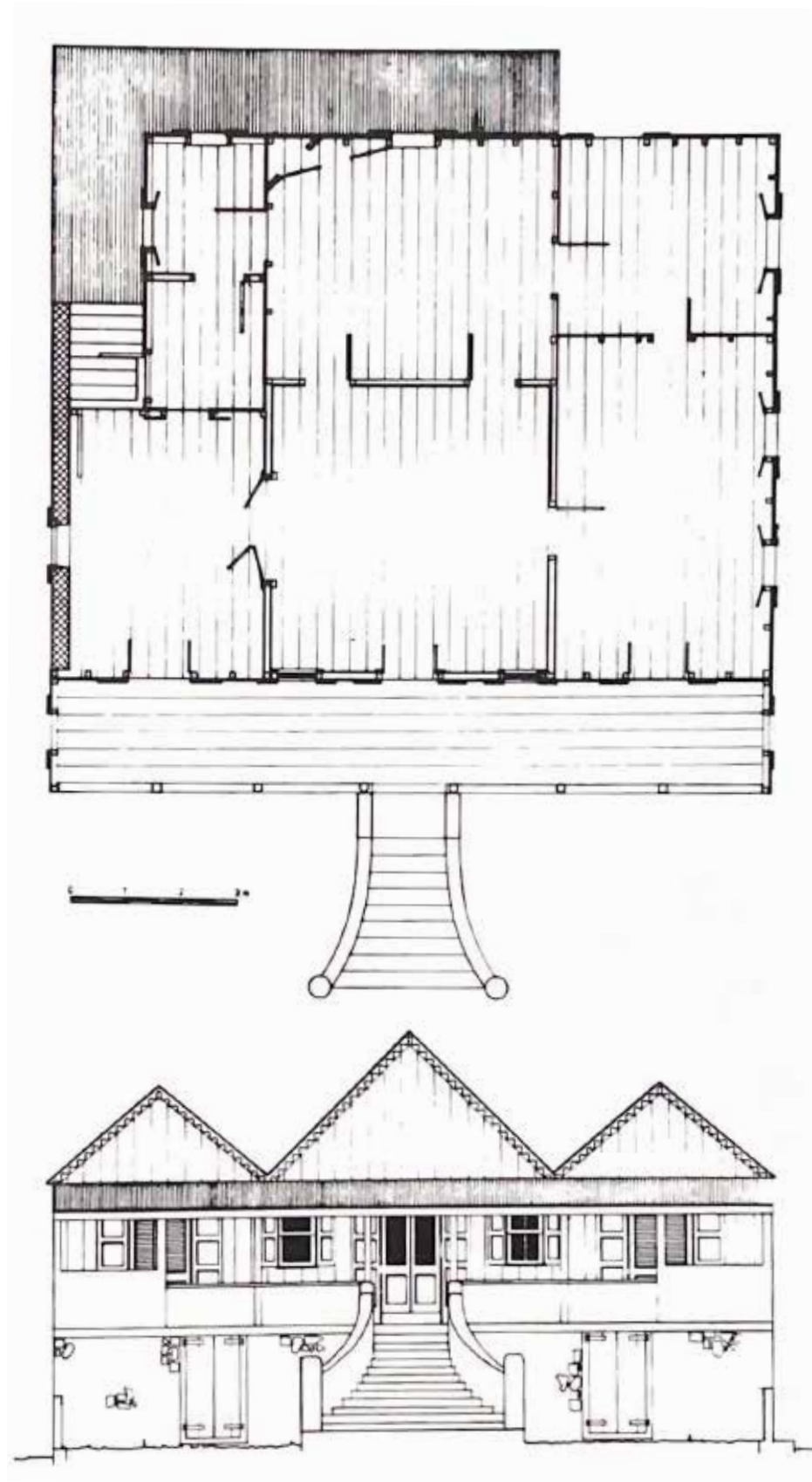


Figure 8. First-floor plan and front elevation of the Belvedere plantation house, representative of traditional Sint Maarten architecture. Drawing by S. Dijkshoorn, 1990

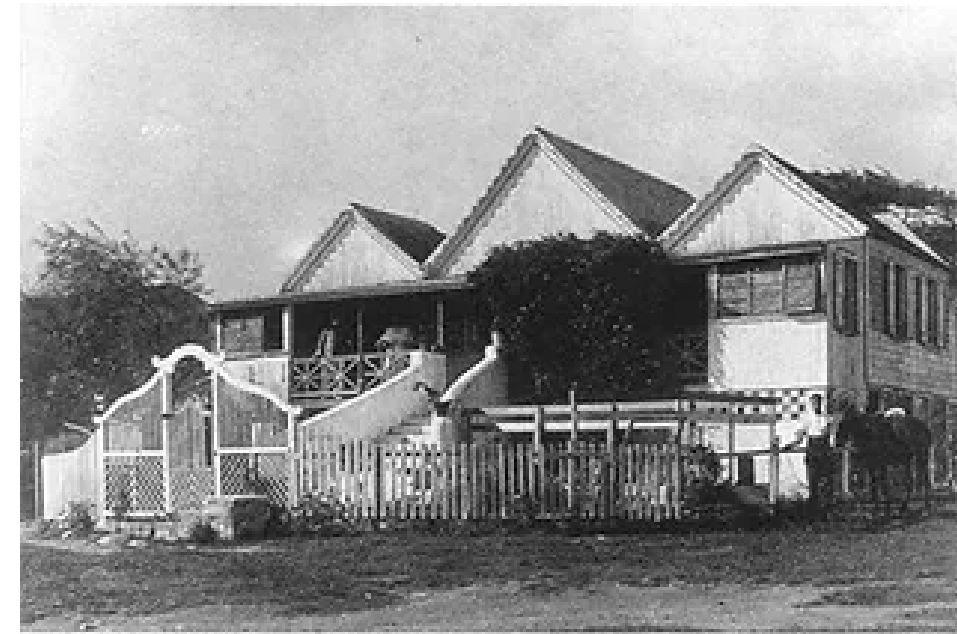


Figure 9. The Belvedere plantation house before it was destroyed in the hurricanes of 1999.

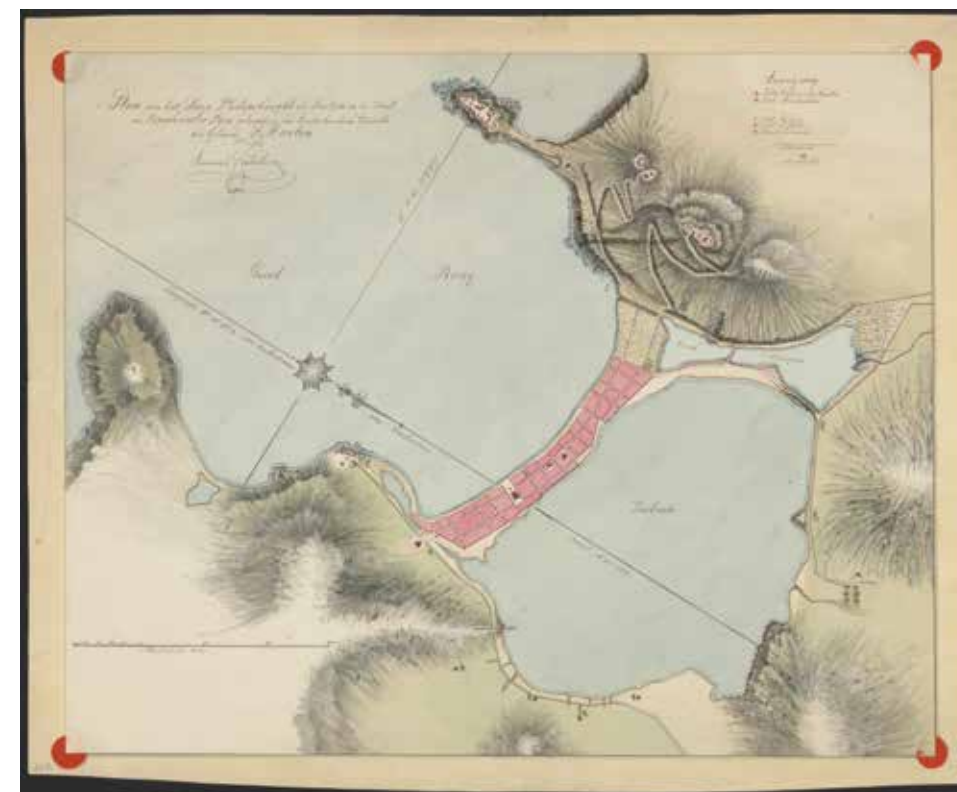


Figure 11. A map of Philipsburg with clear indications of the Courthouse, Fort Willem, Fort Amsterdam, Fort Belair, and Fort Pieter in 1817 by Samuel Fahlberg.

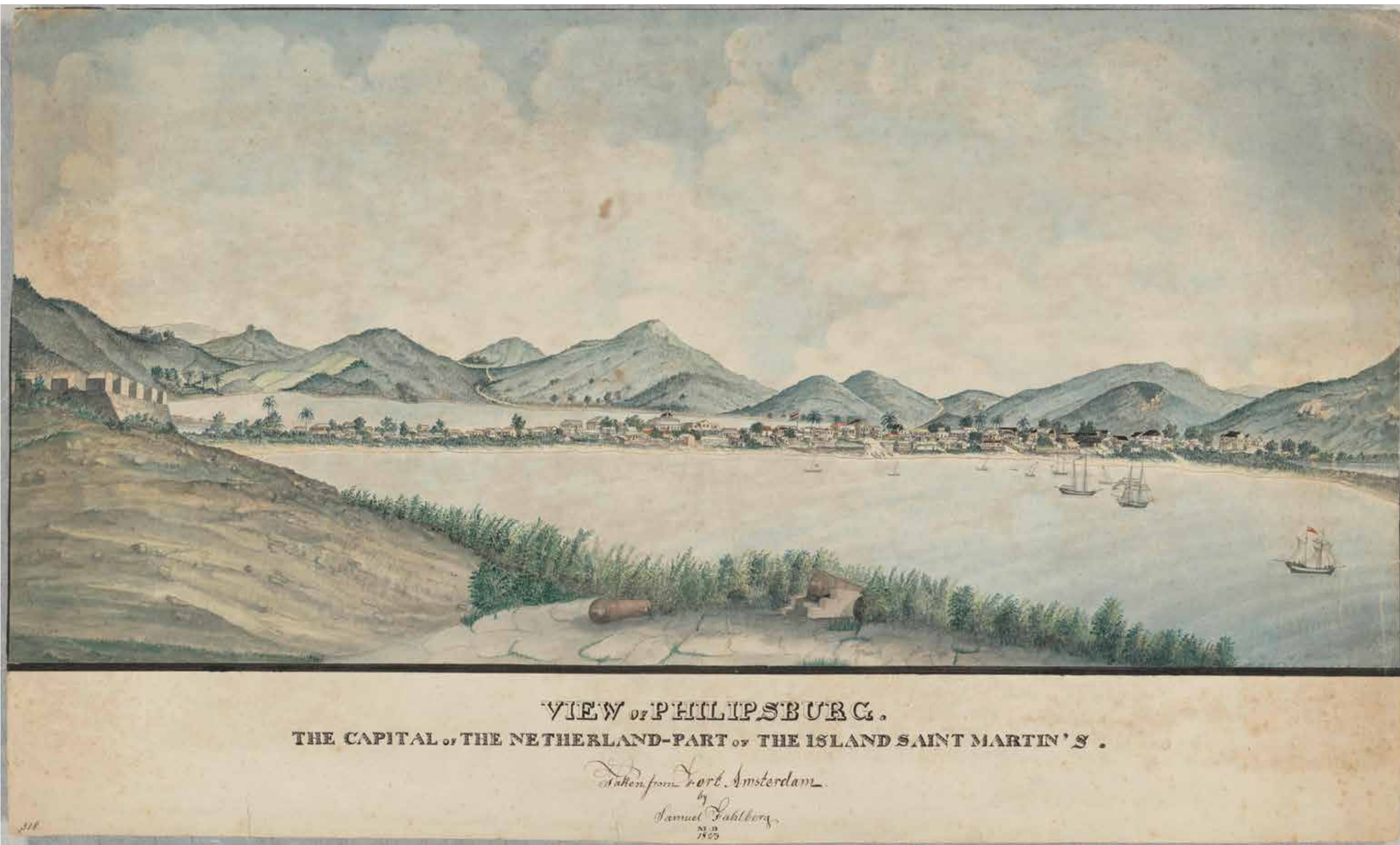


Figure 10.A painting of Philipsburg by Samuel Fahlberg, 1823

2.3 The three courthouse designs

The original courthouse was designed by John Handleigh, a surveyor who had done other civil engineering works on the island. Together with Governor Rink, they planned to build the courthouse, a large building for all government functions. Hartog states that the building was built in “a respectable manner” (Hartog, 1974). This means that they wanted to make a statement. The design was limited to the front and back street as well as Wilhelmina Street and Hendrik Street to the left and right, making the building 10 meters wide and 35 meters long (Lesterhuis & Oers, 2001). The rectangular building included a spacious balcony that span the entire width of the building, this was held up by two columns that accentuated the entrance on the ground floor. This along with the equal distances between windows gave the courthouse a classical look. The hipped roof is similar to the architecture typical of Philipsburg. On the other hand, the walls were made of stone 46 cm thick. The interior was separated into large rooms.

When the courthouse was destroyed in 1819 by a devastating hurricane, Samuel Fahlberg, a cartographer and painter, whose maps and paintings are among those represented in this paper was hired to design the new courthouse. He was also a meteorologist, civil engineer, and physician. Fahlberg’s design, though similar in shape and principal was different in many ways. The upper floor was rebuilt with a wooden structure and façade and the balcony decreased in size, now resting on four columns. A bell tower was also added. This restoration only saw major changes to the exterior of the courthouse and was completed in 1826. The characteristic white and green paint on the building may have been added during this restoration of 1817 to 1873. This is assumed because Hartog mentions the masonry ground floor was “whitewashed” during this time (Hartog, 1974).

In 1964 Lieutenant governor Jan Jacob Beaujon commissioned architect Abraham J.C Brouwer to renovate the building after years of wear and tear and a termite infestation. Unlike the Fahlberg’s restoration, much work was done to the interior. The partitions were changed to better occupy the various government activities taking place at this time. The lieutenant governor made it clear that he wanted the exterior to remain the same to preserve the building’s heritage. To do this the first floor was redone in stone but was cased in wood to imitate the characteristic façade. The balcony was also redone in stone and concrete. One of the most obvious changes is the increased height of 60cm to the first floor. Although it was an error made by the contractor, the architect was fond of this (Hartog, 1974). The architect may have found this favourable because it likely played with the perspective, giving the first floor a heavier look, therefore giving the building a more stoic look. The renovations were completed in 1969. Although the building has undergone many minor renovations until present, it resembles for the most part the changes of this renovation. The architecture of the courthouse will be further discussed in the following chapter when answering the question: How does the courthouse architecture express monumentality?

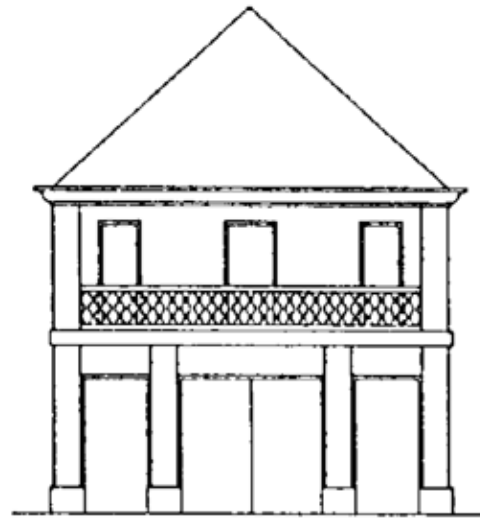


Figure 12. The courthouse by John Handleigh completed in 1793.



Figure 13. The courthouse by Samuel Fahlberg completed in 1826.

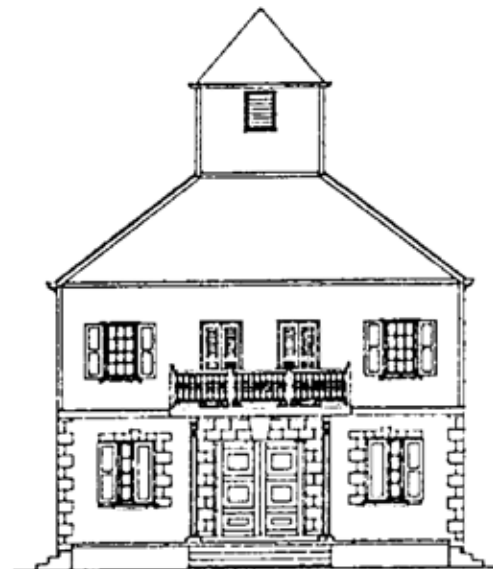


Figure 15. The courthouse by Abraham J.C Brouwer completed in 1969.



Figure 14. Three young girls in front of the courthouse between 1944-1964



Figure 16. The courthouse. The sign on the left reads “You are now on St. Maarten. The Friendly Island. Enjoy yourself”.



Figure 17. The floorplans for the three major courthouse restorations discussed in this paper by year. Adapted from drawings in GEMEENSCHAPPELIJK HOF VAN JUSTITIE VAN DE NEDERLANDSE ANTILLEN EN ARUBA. (July 1992). Courthouse St. Maarten Projektdossier - Plan'D2 windward islands

Chapter 3. Exploring the monumentality of the Philipsburg Courthouse

A monument is a type of structure which was explicitly created to commemorate a person or event, or which has become relevant to a social group (Verdonschot et al., 2022). The Monument Ordinance of Sint Maarten (1999) defines a monument as:

“A movable or immovable object that was made at least 50 years ago and that is considered to be of general interest due to its beauty, artistic value, meaning for science, the nation’s history or its value for cultural anthropology.”

According to these definitions the courthouse can then be considered a monument. The Philipsburg courthouse has grown over the generations with the country of Sint Maarten and bears familiarity to the way of life of the people and their cultural background. To further investigate its monumentality the following questions will be answered. How does the courthouse mean? What type of monument is the courthouse? How does the architecture of the courthouse express monumentality? What role did the courthouse play in plantation and post-slavery period and what role does it play today?

3.1 How does the courthouse mean?

The building of monuments can be considered one of the oldest types of architecture. In the past humans would create structures, sometimes as simple as placing a huge stone to indicate the presence of society. By doing this, monuments thousands of years ago provided the evidence of the human and expressed their identity and ambitions (Verdonschot et al., 2022). Similarly, today monuments are built to commemorate a person or event, creating an identity.

The modern concept of monument emerged in the 1400’s along with nationalism when the ruling-class began to build and conserve what were called monuments (Palacios González, 2024). In the Netherlands the monument list includes mainly built heritage but also monuments such as statues and memorials, as well as archaeological sites. The concept grew in the 1900’s when laws were created to preserve the monuments and they were viewed as national heritage (Palacios González, 2024).

During the plantation period, Sint Maarten could be considered a small community. Neighbouring, St. Eustatius was seen as the successful trading hub and at some point, Sint Maarten was even a dependency of the smaller island (Goslinga, 1985). Both islands though were somehow inferior to Curacao, the capital of the Netherlands in the West Indies. Though Governor Rink argued practical reasons for the construction of the courthouse, the building may have had a deeper purpose, even if this only existed in his subconscious. Although it was not specifically built to commemorate a person or event, the building was meant to make a

statement. The courthouse at the time it was built was the only ceremonial building in Philipsburg. In creating this grand governmental building, Rink was defining the islands presence and creating a national identity. Through the establishment of this public building that served the people, he did not only identify and define a sort of national identity but was also able to establish a bond with the land, just like people did thousands of years ago with the placement of stones (Verdonschot et al., 2022). The building was evident of the zeitgeist. The cultural, social, and mostly political situation at the time it was built.

Hence, although the courthouse was not intentionally created to be a monument it was created to make a statement. The expression of monumentality grew overtime because of what the people saw the building to be and the touristic views that became attached to the building’s identity.

3.2 What type of monument is the courthouse?

Monuments can be classified into different types. If we take the definition of a monument used above; a monument explicitly created to commemorate a person or even is intentional while a structure that has become relevant to a social group is unintentional. In the book Monuments, Verdonschot and Zhou (2022, p.16) also define static and dynamic monuments as well as monuments “belonging to the past and those orienting to the future”.

As previously discussed, the courthouse is a historic monument- an unintentional monument. Horst Jansen defined three intentional monuments. The funeral monument, the monument to historical ideas and events and the monument dedicated to great men (Verdonschot et al., 2022). Though the courthouse does not fall into these categories he goes on to say, intentional monuments are built to last. During the restoration of 1964, we see that measures were taken to preserve the courthouse better. This was after the monumental idea had already been imprinted in people’s mind and the idea of heritage was growing.

Whether the structure is static or dynamic has to do with the sustainability of the monument. Static monuments are designed to stand through the ages while dynamic monuments undergo renovations and restorations continually while trying to maintain its original values. Though static monuments are more synonymous with the west, the Dutch-built courthouse is dynamic like the monuments in the east.

Even though dynamic monuments are usually oriented to the future, the courthouse may belong to the past. The tangible and intangible attributes like its architecture which is still familiar to Dutch colonial works and the meaning which was discussed above is still appreciated by contemporary society and unlikely to change. It holds eternal value that can be recognized by people from different generations.

3.3 How does the architecture of the courthouse express monumentality?

Umberto Eco, a historian, and philosopher said, “We commonly do experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality” (Eco, 1997, p.174). The courthouse is more than utilitarian, it contributes to the built environment and the collective memory of society. The courthouse was designed to show status and political power. The physical attributes of a monument play a major role on the way it is perceived.

3.3.1 The symbolic meaning of the courthouse’s architecture

The courthouse possesses a style like that of the traditional West Indian architecture found on the island of Sint Maarten. Its rectangular footprint, the hipped roof and wooden facade are representative of this style. At the time it was built, the building blended well with its surroundings, being a good representative of the zeitgeist- it belonged to Philipsburg.

Joan van Andel describes a colourful Philipsburg, most structures are painted in at least three colours that strongly contrast each other, this is characteristic of the town (Van Andel, 1985). The iconic large white span walls of the courthouse contrast the surrounding buildings in the capital giving it a commanding presence. The brightness of white can make the building appear larger and more imposing, contributing to the sense of monumentality. White is also timeless and evokes a sense of elegance. Dark green trimmings can be seen around the windows and horizontally along the façade, separating the stories on the facade. These along with the green quoins, typical of classical architecture, outline the building keeping it from being lost in its surroundings.

Being one of the few remaining wood clad structures in Philipsburg, now that concrete is the building material of choice, the wood reminds locals of island culture as it is inherently associated with warmth and comfort making the building feel more inviting and comfortable. The horizontal wooden cladding adds texture and depth to facades, making it visual interest and adding dimension. This breaks up the large spans of wall, adding character and personality to the building’s exterior. The wooden slats follow the contours of the building seamlessly, this emphasises the buildings massiveness and contributes to its monumentality. Keystones can be seen as part of the lintel of external doors and windows on the ground floor. This is unusual as they do not form arches. This implies that they are purely decorative. The term “keystone” in itself implies that it is an essential element. Seen a lot in classical architecture, the keystones may symbolise the strength and stability of the building.

The courthouse was built before the catholic church and the methodist church in Philipsburg, two other historically tall buildings. At the time it was built we can assume the height towered over the town’s skyline expressing

grandeur and importance. Even though it is no longer the tallest building the memory of this impressiveness may be imprinted in the collective memory of the locals forever.

At the top of the bell tower, a spire hovers over Philipsburg. Through the years the form of the spire has changed numerous times. Currently it takes on the form of a pineapple. Though the meaning of the pineapple is unclear, this adornment draws the eye upwards, creating a sense of elevation and grandeur. Intricate architectural detailing, such as this enhances the sense of monumentality by adding character to the structure and elevating its visual impact. Spires often have historical significance and symbolic meaning. Although is not exactly known when the pineapple was added, it can be assumed it was as early as the Fahlberg renovation of 1826. The writings of Marten Douwes Teenstra, a Dutch writer and traveller who visited the island in 1829 describe the courthouse,

“The same façade, which adorns the very large royal coat of arms carved in it, bears a small square turret, the spire of which is decorated with a gilded pineapple, and in which a gate and a clock without clockwork are found” (Teenstra, 1836, p.250-251, translated from Dutch).

As discussed, earlier Samuel Fahlberg was highly educated and artistic. It can then safely be assumed that the pineapple was symbolic. The Smithsonian library says the pineapple “was first a symbol of exoticism, power, and wealth, but it was also an emblem of colonialism, weighted with connections to plantation slavery” (Blakely, 2021). Because of its display of status, pineapples then became a symbol of welcome and hospitality as Europeans would use them to impress at gatherings. The original meaning of the pineapple on the courthouse can then be left up for interpretation.

The design and placement of partitions in the building reinforce spatial hierarchies, emphasizing certain areas as more important than others. In the original design the larger rooms like the entrance hall can be seen to the front of the building and on the ground floor. In the following renovations smaller private chambers were added with transition spaces between them.



Figure 18. The front façade of the courthouse

3.3.2 An investigation into the courthouse's influence on its surrounding environment

Point eight in the Nine points on Monumentality by Sigfried Giedion states "Sites for monuments must be planned." He says in large open spaces monumental architecture can find an appropriate setting and new urban centres can come to life (Giedion, 1958). The courthouse was built on the former and larger Michiel de Ruyter square, enclosing it on the north side. One could imagine this square was used as an informal meeting point for the locals, and therefore a good place to build a public building. The courthouse is the first ceremonial element to be added to Philipsburg. Located in the centre of the rectilinear town, horizontal streets run toward it, further emphasizing its importance. The idea that the island was a small community could be another reason that the courthouse was built at the centre of the town, as it functioned more as a townhall than a courthouse.

As mentioned above monuments commemorate events to contribute to the collective memory. Although the courthouse itself does not commemorate an event, it often attracted monuments that did. A monument in memory of then Princess Juliana's visit to the island in 1944 was placed directly in front of the building. Similarly, a memorial for Antilleans killed in the second world war followed in 1957. After the hurricane of 1819, equipment from Fort Willem was transferred to the C.M Wathey Square. Teenstra also mentions the presence of military personnel and equipment in and around the courthouse. With this transfer, the courthouse became both the military, commercial and governmental centre of Philipsburg (Lesterhuis & Oers, 2001). These monuments were later removed to give the courthouse priority on the square (Hartog, 1974). Other important buildings were also attracted to the courthouse. A police precinct stood on the other end of the square. However, it was destroyed in 1937 restoring the beautiful view of the courthouse from the waterfront (Hartog, 1974). The square changed to accommodate the courthouse showing the intentional appreciation of the building.

In 1864 a fence was added around the front garden creating a courtyard. There is little reason besides the fact that a peaceful recreational space was desired in front of the building. The enclosed courtyard acts a transition space between the public and private. This physical boundary creates a sense of anticipation and significance as people move from the busy square to the more controlled environment, emphasizing the importance of the courthouse.

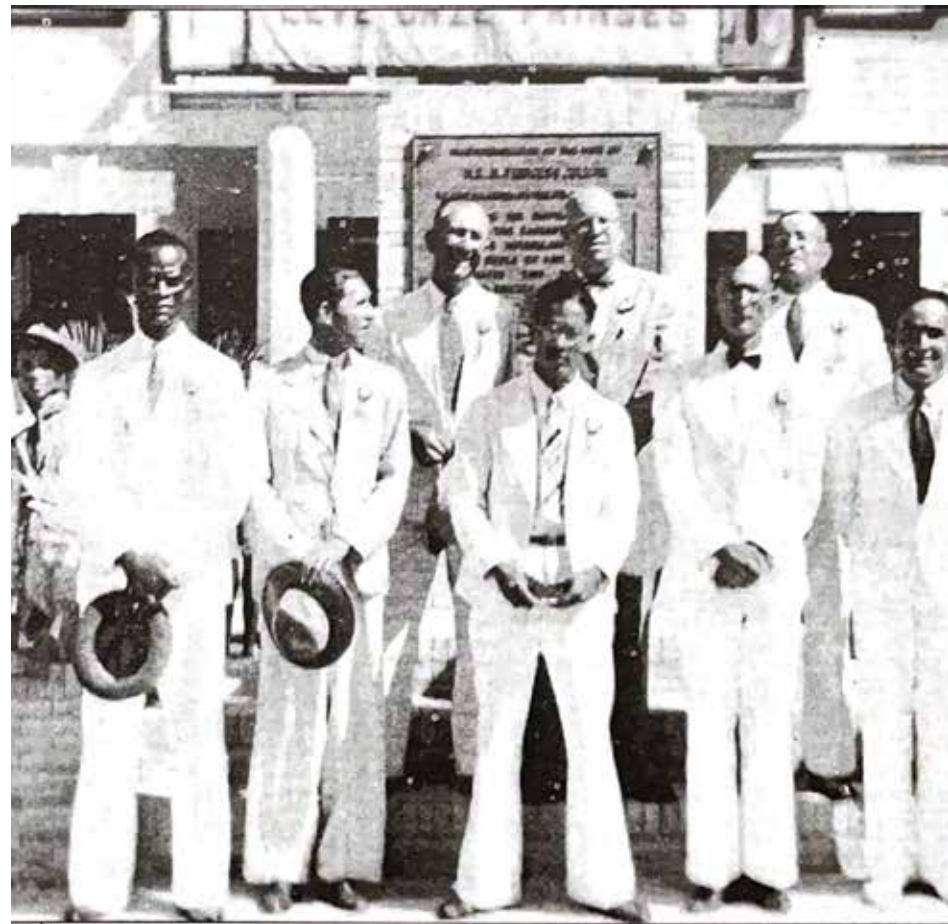


Figure 20. The inauguration of the Princess Juliana memorial in 1944.



Figure 22. Former view from the courthouse with the Saba in the foreground, around 1950.



Figure 21. The Princess Juiana memorial (background) and World War II memorial (foreground). Photo by Guy Hodge around 1960

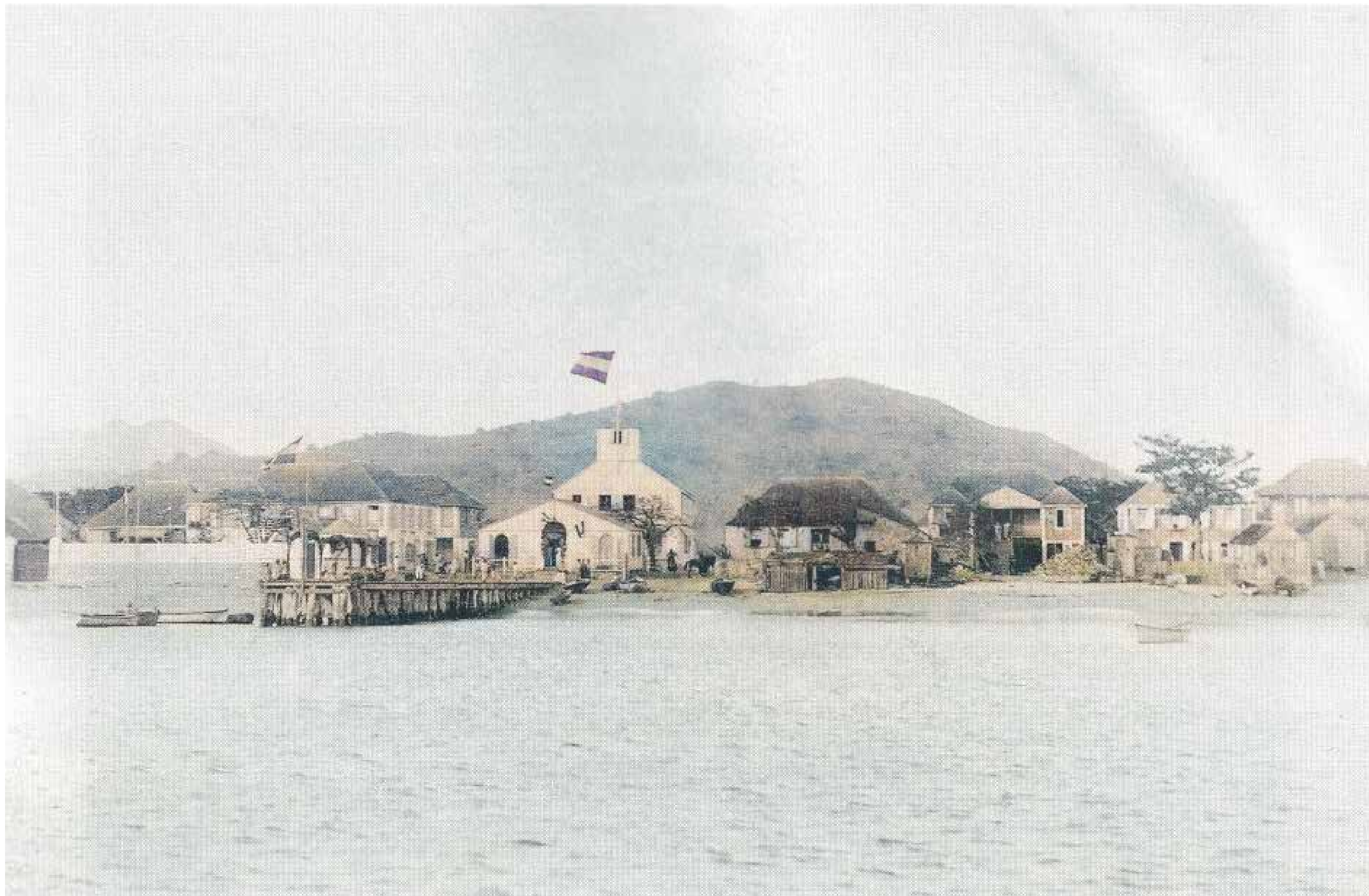


Figure 19. The police precinct on de Ruyter square, around 1890.

3.4 What role did the courthouse play in the plantation and post-slavery periods and what role does it play today?

The way a building is interpreted can change over time and across cultures. The culture on Sint Maarten has shifted from a society of plantation and slavery to the touristic success it is now. In the plantation and post-slavery periods the courthouse may have been multivocal.

It was a representative building for the colonizers, a place of nationalism and community. We see that the building had many functions and attracted many activities. It welcomed very elaborate events, for example celebrations of singing and dancing after the French captured the Dutch-side in 1795. But it could also be as mundane as hosting the stand for the fire engine, which was important because most buildings in Philipsburg were made of wood (Hartog, 1794). It was the point of commerce for all on the island as it also operated as the weighing house, thus plantation owners would bring goods here for external export. Will Johnson, former Island Council Member for the Dutch Windward Islands recalls times when the entire Council would make appearances on the balcony during public occasions (Johnson, 2019). The bell tower was also used to give official and unofficial announcements like funerals and weddings. Residents could also pay to have specific news announced. The fact that all residents had to contribute to the cost of the rebuilding in 1819 also shows the building's importance for the settlers.

For the enslaved Africans it was most likely viewed as a point of control, as the bell would indicate the times to start and stop working, and because it was associated with the ruling Europeans. On July 1st, 1863, the emancipation proclamation was read on the balcony of the courthouse by Governor Willem Hendrik Johan van Idsinga. On this day celebrations took place in the streets of Philipsburg and on the C.M. Wathey Square. In the days following the freed Africans would return to the square in front of the courthouse in dance with drums and tambourines, chanting "Good morning our governor. We thank you for our freedom" (Speetjens, 2002). Altogether, these examples prove the Courthouse is not just one of the valuable buildings in Philipsburg but has always played a vital role in the lives of the people of Sint Maarten.

The view that future generations will have of a monument is dependent on the existing context, norms, and values of the time it was built (Verdonschot et al., 2022). However, there is not much talk of desecration towards the courthouse despite it being a colonial building, considering the trending dialogue of decolonializing monuments. There may be many reasons for this. A study on the socio-political shifts over the centuries may have to be done to uncover these. The author believes one of these reasons may be the continuous shift of power between the different European rulers before the modern period. This may have caused an unconscious detachment between the building and the Dutch. In 2000, Ank Klomp wrote there was a lack of Dutch identity on the island (Klomp, 2000).

When the concept of monuments began to dissolve into the new concept of heritage, after the world wars there was a growing patriotic attachment to battered monuments and an increased desire for national identity. Soon, the building was depicted on the coat of arms of Sint Maarten, and three years later, in 1985 was pictured on the Sint Maarten flag. This gives us an idea of how important the building remained. Now the building functions solely as the only courthouse on the Dutch-side of the island and may represent the governance and legal system of Sint Maarten. It embodies principles of justice, rule of law. What has stayed consistent is the ability of the courthouse to remain important over the years.

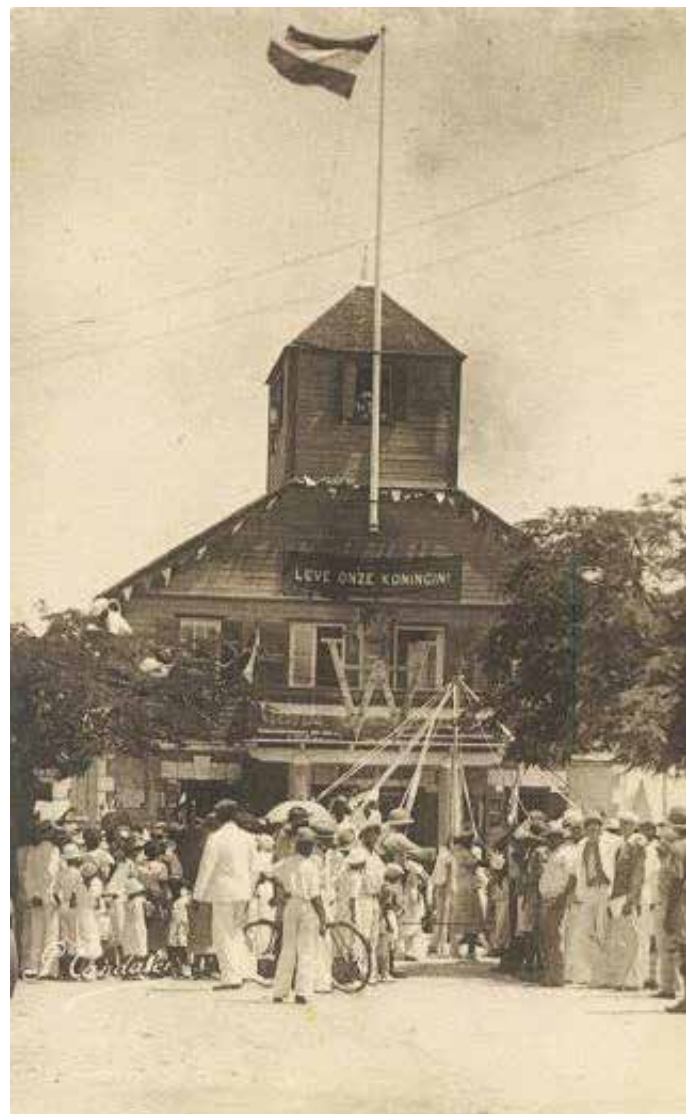


Figure 23. A celebration in front of the courthouse. The sign reads "leve onze koningin" (long live our queen).



Figure 24. A depiction of the Emancipation Day celebration in front of the courthouse on July 1st 1863. Painting by Stanislas Defize, 2001. (Image edited with AI to remove text over photo)

Conclusion

The courthouse in Philipsburg, Sint Maarten was awarded monumental status in 2008. To investigate what made the courthouse monumental the following questions were examined. How does the courthouse mean? What type of monument is the courthouse? How does the architecture of the courthouse express monumentality? What role did the courthouse play in the plantation and post-slavery periods and what role does it play today? Before answering these questions, a study was done on the history of the Dutch in the Caribbean and on Sint Maarten to examine the social implications of the building. The history of the island demanded for a representative building that would showcase the prosperity and relevance of the island. The building was originally built to function as a city hall but took on many functions like weighing house, post office, “fire station” and prison during the plantation and post-slavery period.

Research was also done on the architectural styles present in the region and on the island from the beginning of the pioneering period to the end of the post-slavery period (1625-1945). Beforehand, the Dutch was thought to have had the largest influence on the building. However, it could later be concluded that the presence of various European powers in the region, influenced the architecture on the island and in turn the courthouse.

The courthouse in Philipsburg, embodies monumentality through its historical significance, architectural design, and role within the community. Initially constructed during the colonial period, it symbolized the authority of the ruling class while serving as a hub for civic activities and trade. Over time, the courthouse has evolved into a dynamic monument, always adapting to fit the current needs of the island. The architecture expresses the local culture, is nostalgic of an important period in the islands history and represents social and community life. Its distinctive architectural features, such as the traditional West Indian style and iconic pineapple spire, contribute to its visual impact and sense of prominence. The courthouse’s central location in Philipsburg and the C.M Wathey Square, emphasizes its importance as a ceremonial and administrative building. Although the building gives off a warm and inviting feeling, the enclosed courtyard acts as a transitional space between the public and private realms, further enhancing its monumentality.

Despite its colonial origins, the courthouse has become a permanent symbol of national identity and heritage for the people of Sint Maarten. Through preservation efforts and symbolic representation on the coat of arms and the national flag, it continues to play a vital role in shaping the collective memory of the island. Altogether these conditions award the courthouse the ability to remain relevant over the centuries and likely in the years to come.

It is important to note many claims were made with the use of maps and historical drawings and paintings. However, it is imperative to remember the lens through which history has been recorded. Early maps of Sint Maarten used in this report were made by different Europeans. Cartography could have been developed for ulterior motives and important information could have been omitted or disregarded.

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Figure 8. Bergsma, G., & Dijkshoorn, S. (1990). Traditional Architecture in the Windward Islands. In Building up the Future from the Past (pp. 89–98). essay, De Walburg Pers.

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