

reallife

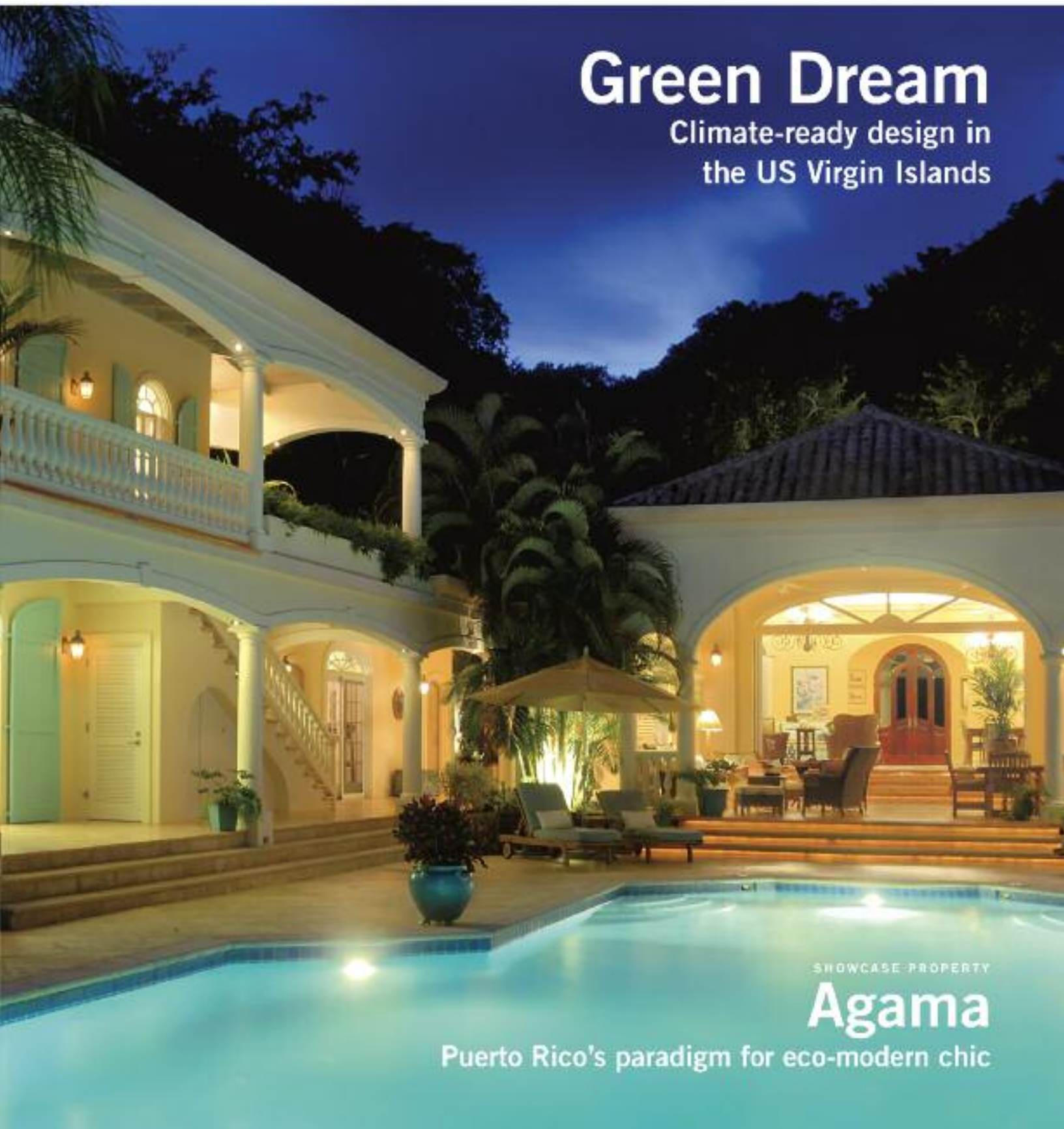
CARIBBEAN LUXURY LIFESTYLE, PROPERTY AND DESIGN MAGAZINE

in this 'green' issue

- Much ado about bamboo
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Green Dream

Climate-ready design in
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Agama

Puerto Rico's paradigm for eco-modern chic

a tale of Endurance

A retrospective look at the innate sustainability of traditional Caribbean architecture. Words by Steve Mouzon

There may be no better example on earth of an architecture so sustainably attuned to its regional conditions, climate and culture than the architecture of the Caribbean. Ironically, this success can be largely attributed to a precarious natural balancing act: life played out on the double-edged sword of an idyllic paradise with the capacity to turn deadly in the blink of an eye. Thus, the Caribbean vernacular emerged in direct response to unique environmental factors. Heat, humidity and a propensity for hurricanes meant that sustainability was not simply a vague notion – rather an essential means for survival. Driven by durability, frugality and an overarching flexibility, the raw appeal of traditional Caribbean design materialised.

Perhaps by virtue of the need to offset such utilitarian roots, the region's traditional architecture developed an ultimate strategy for ensuring longevity. Played out in the vibrant, tropical hues of painted surfaces, the soft contours of simple handcrafted elements and the sheltering shapes of great roofs, an endearing, enduring style evolved – secondary to the superseding demands of pragmatism – that assured lasting allure. With lush, tropical garden rooms, terraces and cool verandahs enticing people to embrace outdoor lifestyles, the future for the dawning age of Caribbean charm never looked so bright. →





enabled buildings to withstand the ravages of debris and storm surges. In a similar vein, solid board shutters stood strong where glass would have smashed, developing over time into a characteristic element of Caribbean architecture.

Borne out by expert research, experience proved that shallow roofs get blown off, whereas roofs with too steep a pitch overturn. Ideally, roof slopes of 8:12 and 9:12 were found to stand a greater chance of survival. Consequently, hipped roofs with their supporting planes became popular options for all but the smallest structures or the heaviest of civic buildings.

And while deep overhangs offered the temptation of shade, they were sitting ducks for vicious winds. Moreover, torrential rains pouring down sloped roofs would quickly dig trenches in the surrounding landscape. Diffusing the force of the water, and throwing it further from the building, shallow flared or 'bell-cast' eaves became iconic signatures of Caribbean style, recognised for their ability to protect both landscape and foundations. →



STRONG LIKE BULL

The truism that buildings must be durable in order to endure is an essential tenet of traditional design. Many lessons in hurricane endurance were learned when people emerged from the wreckage of their homes only to find their neighbours' houses intact. Learning by trial and error, they honed architectural techniques to minimise damage and maximise durability.

With many low-lying, flood-prone areas of the Caribbean, heavy masonry walls were the obvious choice, offering resilience for ground floor dwellings. However, upper storeys, which drained quickly, more often than not utilised wood. This, along with the use of heavy piers to support verandahs and raise buildings above the surrounding earth, alleviated problems with flooding and



Above: Casa de Velásquez, Santiago de Cuba. Many of the gallery's screen panels are designed to pivot. They offer protection from the sun as well as allowing air to circulate. Photo by Brent Winebrenner. Courtesy of Dr. Michael Connors.

Left: Strawberry Hill, Jamaica. Photo by Steve Mouzon

Previous Page: Pedro St James in Grand Cayman.



Left: The Halton Great House in St Philip Parish, Barbados. Photo by Brent Winebrenner. Courtesy of Dr. Michael Connors. **Above:** Schooner Bay, Abaco, The Bahamas. Photo by Steve Mouzon



DEAR PRUDENCE

With extreme climatic conditions dictating heavy maintenance, frugality influenced the face of architectural design, giving precedence to outdoor spaces. Central to tropical living, lush gardens, covered terraces and airy verandahs allowed people to acclimatise to environmental conditions, making the transition inside less acute. By utilising exterior circulation, the need for interior hallways was negated, leading to smaller structures and the conservation of materials.

While not prevalent in today's monolithic structures, it was common practice to build wings to a thickness of only a single room's width due to the benefits of cross-ventilation and the advantages of daylight flooding the room from two sides. Louvers, now used more as a decorative motif, had a strong practical application: to maximise shade while allowing unrestricted aeration. Sadly, the ensuing loss of great public places and private gardens has come at the cost of driving many of us indoors, necessitating air conditioning where it was not always the case.

Traditional architecture, therefore, has never been solely about style, but rather about being intensely shaped by conditions, climate and culture – all elements that conspire to produce a sort of authenticity of purpose, a collective experience that connects people all across the globe. As legendary explorer, Ernest Shackleton so aptly stated, "Superhuman effort isn't worth a damn unless it achieves results," and such is the story of Caribbean architecture. Doggedly determined by the need to endure, the innate sustainability and simple charm of the region's architectural forms define the abiding nature of Caribbean style. 🏡

Opposite page (clockwise from top left):
Ca'Liza, Nassau, The Bahamas, Photo by Carlos Ignacio Morales.
Courtesy of Amanda Lindroth.

A mid-nineteenth century Willemstad townhouse. The second-storey dormers retain the period crown details characteristic of Netherlands Antilles architecture. Photo by Brent Winebrenner. Courtesy of Dr. Michael Connors.

Schooner Bay, Abaco, The Bahamas. Photo by Steve Mouzon.

A polka dot Dutch Caribbean colonial kitchen. Photo by Brent Winebrenner. Courtesy of Dr. Michael Connors.

Lyford Cay, Nassau, The Bahamas. Photo by Steve Mouzon.

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