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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Virgin Island Sketches

Caribbean Sketches

Voyage into Ireland

Townscapes

Caribbean Insights

For The Sake of The Children

Notes on the Nude

Notes for Life Class Students & Models

Where the Pleasant Fountains Lie

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FOREWORD

By way of pen and ink drawings made on the spur of the moment and fleeting diary notes, my books Virgin Island Sketchesand Caribbean Sketches capture the essence of life as it was lived in the Caribbean during the closing decades of the twentieth century. The collection of essays contained in this book continues on the same theme. The earliest dates from the 1970’s and they continue up to the present. Although my essays were originally conceived with Dominica and the British Virgin Islands in mind, for the most part the themes apply equally to elsewhere in the Caribbean.

A Plea for the Practical.

While the Principal of the University of the West Indies Open Campus laments low registration in tertiary institutions of learning and the government’s objective is a degree student in every home, I am making a plea for the practical.

Let me begin by saying that I am not decrying learning. What I am questioning is the current obsession with academic qualifications. A degree is not the only qualification, nor is it necessarily the most useful one in the real world. At this point in time Dominica desperately needs a fully skilled workforce.

You will note that I state “fully skilled” rather than “semi-skilled”. All too often the latter passes for the former.

While it is accepted that a master’s degree entails no less than a five-year course of study, there is the perception that a skill can be learnt in six weeks or six months. In fact, learning a skill takes longer than studying for a degree. A six-year indentured apprenticeship is just the beginning.

There is also the misconception that skilled work requires less intellect and hence, the recommended career choice for the less bright student. But intellect alone is not the deciding factor. A recent study that accessed the all-round ability required for different trades and professions, found that the highly skilled mechanical engineer came out above the brain surgeon.

This is not to say that the surgeon is not skilled. Thankfully, a fundamental requirement for the medical profession is practical hands-on experience on the wards. As with all professions, a certificate is not enough. In my engineering apprenticeship days, you were not allowed to set foot in the drawing office until you had gained at least seven years practical experience on the shop floor. Nowadays, a graduate that would not know a spanner if one fell on his head, goes straight from college to the drawing board.

Likewise, I have found salesmen manning market stalls more persuasive than marketing managers. Their captivating sales patter cannot be taught in college. In terms of Customer Relations, I would nominate a lady who works behind the counter at a Roseau bread shop in preference to the executive high on the corporate ladder. As a painter and sculpture, I declared myself as an artist on the pavements of France. I have never spent a day at Art College, but then again, neither did any of the great artists from the past.

I have a profound respect for the skilled man at his workbench. Not only did these men teach me engineering and carpentry, they also instilled in me a love for poetry, music and literature. Let us not forget that the world’s built heritage was the work of carpenters and masons. The world of academia tends to focus on specialization, whereas a skilled and intuitive person is remarkably adaptable. Creativity is all embracing and thrives on doing rather than theorizing.

Perhaps it was to stress the value of the practical that Jesus came into this world as a carpenter. However, for his second coming, his want of academic qualifications may be frowned upon.

Enabling a Built Environment.

In the Caribbean the word environment is taken to mean the landscape. Consequently, a blind eye is turned towards the built environment. If left alone, nature can look after herself. It is what we build upon the land that disfigures the landscape. I might add that we also ignore the social environment.

I am not advocating that we put the clock back and live under thatch. Nor am I writing this from the comfort of a palatial villa. With my family of four I live in a small space above my studio and workshop. What I am suggesting, is that we take greater care in designing buildings and structures and consider their effect on communities. Remember, the individuality of places, reflects the individuality of ourselves.

By design I am not referring to building codes and standards. Technicalities alone will not produce a structure that is pleasing to the eye and fit for its purpose. And a college degree does not necessarily solve the problem. Up to a hundred years ago, it was the master craftsman that determined good design and from his workbench beauty and function unselfconsciously equated. Thomas Telford (1757-1834), the godfather of civil engineering, left school when he was twelve and served his apprenticeship as a stone mason. I am sure that Telford would have crossed Dominica’s Roseau River in one dramatic leap, as he did the Menai Straits, and not by timidly leap frogging across in three hops.

Vernacular comes from within, not from without. A building, and by extension a lifestyle, that may be fitting for Florida or Dubai, is not necessarily fitting for Dominicans living in Dominica. It is difficult to build something ugly out of natural materials. Stone, bamboo and hardwoods contribute to beauty, but concrete is less amenable. An architect’s job is surely not just to get concrete and steel to stick together. All too often the crucial design element, the bits we have to look at, suggests that many in the profession are visual impaired. Detailing, texture and scale are beyond their understanding.

Architecture is our most visible art form: we live with it and look at it every day of our lives. Unlike paintings, furniture, and the clothes we wear, buildings cannot be moved around or changed at whim.

Physical planners and their respective ministries need a greater sensitivity to their homeland. Without it the whole island will degenerate into squalor. Roads have become parking places and a dumping ground for spent vehicles. Advertising hoardings are rampart and in Roseau pedestrians made exile. We need to revive the art of townscapes and create neighborhoods that are people friendly. Quick fix results and beautification (a word that sets my teeth on edge) will not solve the problem.

Land is man’s most precious possession: cars and gold chains pale beside it. God stopped making land a long time ago. It therefore behooves us to utilize what we have in such a way that future generations can be proud. Rebuilding from the devastation wrought by Tropical Storm Erika presents an opportunity to build back better, but building better means building back differently.

School Textbooks: Questions & Answers.

Last year Dominica’s Education Minister raised concerns about the number of textbooks required by students at Grade 6 level. Well let me tell you, the minister’s concern is nothing compared to the shock, horror and disbelief of parents at the number and cost of textbooks at all levels. The cost of the textbooks required by my son, now entering his third year at the Dominica Grammar School, adds up to almost one thousand dollars.

This begs two questions: why so many and why so expensive.

First, let us investigate the high cost of text books. Over the last thirty years, due to improved printing technology, the cost of books in general has gone down. However, over the same period the cost of text books has risen dramatically. Given that the publisher has a guaranteed market and a captive audience – 16 English speaking Caribbean Countries subscribe to the CXC syllabus – the price should be less. But when it comes to text books, the traditional factors that exert a control over prices don’t exist: the consumer has no choice. You are told what you must buy.

Secondly: why so many. Are frequent new editions really necessary and why does the life span of a book cover only one year out of six. Mathematics and the English language have not significantly changed in centuries. The properties of a circle remain the same, as does the use of nouns and verbs. Looking through my son’s past textbooks only a fraction of the pages are dog-eared and pencil marked. This suggests that 90% of the contents have not been needed. One expensive text book has never been used at all! Curiously, Business Studies, the one subject that might benefit from up-to-date material, requires no textbook.

Incidentally, the combined weight of text books, exercise books and other contents of the school bag must exceed health and safety requirements for a child. Even if the child can take the weight, the bags can’t. The stitching and zippers begin to go before the end of the first term. This brings us to a third question: why textbooks at all?

We now have the benefit of the internet, plus the government gave every student a tablet. Hence, we have a most amazing resource tool, but one that is not being used to its full potential. When computers were first introduced to UK schools in the 1990’s, I relayed a day-to-day account of work in progress on a piece of sculpture that was specially commissioned for that purpose. These and subsequent diary pages were eventually accessed by schools and colleges through the world. With the advent of tablets, I began a similar site for Dominican students. However, the education authority showed no interest in alerting schools, nor the press in informing the general public. Hence, my virtual teaching soon became virtually dead.

But technology aside, the most ingenious teaching device ever invented has been around for centuries. I refer to the blackboard! When I went to Secondary Modern School in the UK in the 1950’s, there were no textbooks. Teachers taught from the blackboard. A blackboard is cost effective, focuses the class and has endless creative possibilities. Although most of my teachers had never attended College, their teaching was pure theatre. They could hold the most unruly class spell bound. But if the attention of Johnny on the back row wandered, the teacher’s well-aimed blackboard duster soon brought him back to earth – with good humour all round. For literature, one book was passed around the class and the children read aloud in turn. Classroom walls were decorated with art work and along the corridors hung prints from famous paintings. It was along those corridors that I first saw the work of Degas and Vincent Van Gogh.

Let me assure you that I am passionate about books, learning and literature. Furthermore, I firmly believe that good teachers are worth their weight in gold. But an over-reliance on text books is not the best way of learning, nor is it the best way of teaching.

School Textbooks: More Questions and Answers.

Just two weeks into the school year, parents of 3rd and 4th year secondary school students are finding that one of their purchases has already fallen to pieces. I refer to, *Developing Language Skills – An English Course for Caribbean Secondary Schools (Books 3 & 4).*

Both books are published by Royards Publishing Company, Trinidad. Book 3 contains 343 pages and retails at a discounted price of EC$68.00. Discounted or not, the book is a rip-off. The binding is the shoddiest that I have ever seen. The pages are individually held together with glue, in the same way that a cheap note pad is held together. Consequently, as soon as the book is opened it falls apart.

The retailer cannot be blamed and I doubt that the book was printed and bound in Trinidad. However, it behooves the publisher to ensure that their books are up to standard. In recent years Far Eastern Countries have made considerable strides in the quality and cost of book printing and binding. To have had the job done properly would only cost a couple of dollars more per copy, especially when we are talking of print runs into the tens of thousands. It also behooves the Department of Education to verify the physical quality of a book before putting it on their list of required reading.

The Caribbean is all too often the dumping ground for inferior and outdated products. Either through apathy or complacency there is a reluctance to complain. I am usually told that I am the only one to bring an issue to the attention of management or supplier. Hence, the inference that I am being unreasonable.

This brings me again to the question: do 3rd and 4th Year students and teachers really need 343 pages of text to get through the year’s English Language syllabus? Given the number of students that leave school functionally illiterate, hefty text books are clearly not the answer. The subject might be taught more effectively from the blackboard together with a well-aimed blackboard duster.

A State of Self-Sufficiency.

In earlier commentaries I have alluded to self-sufficiency. I will now risk getting into deep water by enlarging on my vision of what Dominica could aspire to. Let me warn you from the onset, my vision will not please everyone. Furthermore, I do not offer it as a quick-fix solution for the difficulties we face in the wake of Hurricane Maria. My vision is long term. It will take at least a generation to move from one mind set to another.

I know of no other equivalent place on earth has the resources to achieve this elusive self-sufficient state. Perhaps this is why larger nations take an envious interest in us. We are potentially the world’s richest nation and yet we wallow in poverty and dependency. Why? Because we hanker after a lifestyle that Dominica is incapable of sustaining.

If you want street lights through the Forestry Reserve, my vision of Dominica is not for you. The same applies to vehicles unsuited to our climate and terrain, large scale manufacturing plants and mass tourism. On the trajectory that Dominica is presently pursuing we will need an International Airport, but for my vision of Dominica, we don’t. There will be less toing and froing. We will be content to stay put and our visitors will be long-term.

My vision of self-sufficiency – which is in effect a true form of independence – goes beyond growing what we eat and eating what we grow. We have the resources to provide 80% of what a simpler lifestyle needs. By “simple” I am not advocating going back to the dark ages. Just as we have realised that black is beautiful, we most also realise that the simple can be profound. While the rest of the region pursues a “climate smart zone”, by developing self-sufficiency we will end up smarter than they are.

I am all for embracing technology. Two hundred years ago it was thought that the machine would free man from universal toil, whereas in fact it robbed him of his skills and made him a slave to the production line. Perhaps now, the technology that is embedded in the internet can go a long way to achieving that earlier goal. For a start it could enable many to work from the home environment rather than spending the beginning and end of each day in a traffic jam.

Rather than harping back to the days of “green gold”, we should be looking forward to the even greater potentials that this crop can offer. The high cellulous content of banana stems can be used for making paper and the filaments can be spun into a thread more valuable than silk.

We do not need large factories but we do need small scale industries to process home grown produce. Our education system needs to adapt to serve Dominica’s needs rather pursuing courses of study prescribed by others. Creative thinking needs to be high on the agenda. We need to relearn skills and cultivate an awareness of beauty. While we laud this “Isle of Beauty” in our National Anthem future generations may accuse us of despoiling their legacy with insensitive development. Mistakes set in concrete are difficult to undo.

Above all, we must remain beautiful in body and mind. For fifty years, as an artist, I have extolled the beauty of the Caribbean and her people. But equally, my task as an artist is to calm those who are disturbed and to disturb those who are calm. Hence, to those I may have disturbed with my vision of self-sufficiency, I make no apology.

Enabling Creative Solutions.

Creative thought is our most valuable human resource. Without it we would forever be repeating the same thing over and over, and there would be no progress. Creative thought is a delicate process that explores regions of the mind that have previously remained closed. Hence, the results are different to what has gone before.

To enable creative solutions, we must first enable creative thinking. All too often the embryo of an idea killed at birth. Suggestions that differ to the norm are held back for fear of ridicule. What is perceived as a “silly question” is more likely to be the first intimation of a totally new concept.

*If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it. (Albert Einstein)*

Committees are the death knell to creative solutions. They are a battle ground of conflicting egos. Rather than nurturing ideas they destroy them before they have a chance of being understood. Creativity is an individual pursuit. The end result of creativity by committee is bland compromise. Innovative ideas do not fit into the comfort zone of how things have always been done. Creative solutions are vulnerable and need a favourable environment for survival. For them to take root we must be optimistic, suspend disbelief and focus on positive implications. Critical analysis can follow.

*No idea is so outlandish that it should not be considered with a searching but at the same time steady eye. (Winston Churchill)*

Specialization hampers creative solutions. Innovation requires diverse experience and knowledge. It is achieved by questioning everything that has gone before and at the same time, utilizing what has gone before. It can sometimes be achieved by putting two diverse thoughts together. My experiments in making specialist paper from Dominica’s abundant natural resources have demanded my skills as artist, engineer and inventor. The remedy for one problem that I encountered lay not in today’s technology but by researching a forgotten process that was last used three hundred years ago. When I served as consultant to one of England’s most ambitious regeneration initiatives the solution to a major traffic problem came not from a college graduate or high-ranking civil servant, but from a housewife standing next to me in the queue at the Post Office.

Research has shown that we are born with 98% the creative potential of genius. But alas, by the time we reach adulthood conformity has reduced it to less than 2%. Those of us who are gifted with dyslexia – and 15% of West Indians are – have a head start in creative thought. Our brains are wired differently, and we simply cannot think the same as everyone else. Dominica has the resources to leave the rest of the region standing. But our potential cannot be realized by using hand-me-down solutions from elsewhere. We must accept that we are different and use that to our advantage by cultivate our own creative solutions.

We must be prepared to accept change. Some years ago, I held a one-day workshop for Dominica’s private and public sectors titled, “Creativity in the Workplace”. To complement the occasion my wife cooked a creative lunch. It was made entirely from local produce but served with a different twist. One table sent their plates back untouched and asked for chicken pelau!

Culture Made Visible.

In the recent E. O. LeBlanc Memorial Lecture, Professor Hazel Simmons-McDonald highlighted the importance of the Creole language in terms of preserving Dominica’s cultural identity. Whilst supporting a case for preserving the Creole language – and by extension Creole dance, music and dress – I consider that one significant aspect of Dominica’s cultural identity is being largely ignored: that being, the built environment.

Throughout life we are confronted with man-made surroundings. Increasingly, our houses, offices and public buildings reflect a foreign influence. Their design and material of construction does not relate to the local environment. Regimented housing is replacing scattered settlements. Hence, Dominica’s visible identity is being eroded. It follows that the individuality of places reflects the individuality of ourselves.

Villages and townships tend to grow of their own accord over a long period of time. There was seldom a pre-determined master plan. The people and their dwellings fitted into the topography of the land: they had to, because in earlier times there was no heavy earth moving equipment to make significant changes. When these settlements are viewed from the air or on a map, it seems that our forefathers had a great contempt of straight lines and regularity.

It is the higgledy-piggledy nature of these country communities that gives them their distinctive appearance and attributes. Not least of these attributes is yard space. Dominica’s sparse population in relation to landmass allows yard space that is the envy of city dwellers throughout the rest of the world. The yard is the family’s domain. It acts as outdoor extension to the house and a breathing space between neighbours.

Dominica has all the natural resources to sustain and promote a vernacular built environment. What is needed is the revival of necessary skills. Take a look at the old wrought iron balcony supports in Roseau and compare them with the shoddy welded fabrications of today. A skilled craftsman cannot be trained in six weeks, let alone six years. It is not just a case of wielding a hammer or pushing a plane, it is the accumulation of knowledge that is handed down from father to son. The great cathedrals from the past were not designed by architects at the drawing board, but by craftsman at the workbench. Thus, the craftsman’s eye becomes a gauge to measure beauty by.

The built environment is particularly relevant at this point in time. Tropical Storm Erika has destroyed whole villages and displaced hundreds of families. Just as you cannot easily uproot a tree that has been growing for a lifetime and re-plant it in a new location; the same difficulty applies to re-settling a community of people. It is one thing to re-locate one by one, in one’s own time and inclination, be it to the next village or to a foreign land. But it is quite another for whole communities to be faced with an unforeseen immediate need to move and leave everything behind.

But a community is not made up of houses alone. Numerous other elements are needed to sustain life. They range from church to rum shop and from school to the village store. Not least is the means of employment and preferably employment within walking distance from home. In the past these elements came together of their own accord over a period of time. To instantly plan a township is an art form in itself. Interestingly, the man who wrote the definitive book on the subject began his working life in the Caribbean. The book, *The Concise Townscape* by Gordon Cullen, should be required reading by all involved in the re-settlement initiative.

Another book that has relevance, is *News from Nowhere* by William Morris. His vision of utopia was set down over a hundred years ago and considered to be “pie in the sky”. However, at this point in time, the book could be considered as a viable blue-print for Dominica.

It is interesting to speculate how Dominicans would have coped with the aftermath of the storm had it occurred eighty years ago. I suspect that every man, woman and child would have immediately started re-building with the resources at hand, albeit initially thatch and woven saplings covered with clay.

In all of this I am not advocating that we return to the dark ages. As an engineer I embrace technology and as an artist, I believe that all work should be creative and pleasurable. Equally, our man-made environment should reflect our individuality and be pleasing to the eye, whether it be the chair we sit on, the plate we eat off, or the house we live in. The re-building from Tropical Storm Erika could be a first step towards the restatement of Dominica’s visible cultural identity and in turn set a benchmark for the rest of the Caribbean.

Relocating a rural community to a town setting.

Don’t get me wrong. I am extremely concerned about the plight of the residents of Petite Savanne and I sympathize with the government’s predicament in the wake of the devastation caused by Tropical Storm Erika. Nevertheless, I question the wisdom of relocating a rural community to a new town setting.

The artist’s impression, which presumably reflects the development concept, appears to be devoid of the principal attribute that contributed to the resident’s lifestyle: namely, yard space. The envisaged new town annihilates the villager’s previous way of life and livelihood. A repetitive high-density housing scheme might be the solution for city dwellers but not necessarily the best solution for rural Dominicans.

Furthermore, there seems to be no attempt to incorporate Dominica’s rich resource of raw materials. These materials have stood the test of time and contribute to what is left of our vernacular architectural heritage. Plastic, steel rebar and concrete are not home grown, and neither is plywood and galvanize. But timber, bamboo, stone, sand, clay and lime mortar are available in abundance. Moreover, we have enough land to give yard space to those who want it.

Elsewhere in the world, the creation of new towns on green field sites, whether they be they high density or garden suburbs, have a checkered history. Relocating whole communities is even more problematic.

An alternative solution would be to assist residents in building their own homes, either on land that remains stable at Petite Savanne, or elsewhere. The scheme could incorporate innovative architectural assistance and the learning of skills. Helping a neighbour with major tasks would revive village unity and restore the pride that is found in using one’s own labour and resources.

But it is not too late. The advantage of a project being at the conceptual stage is that concepts are not set in concrete. As a design engineer I frequently go back to the drawing board and as a sculptor and painter my preliminary sketch is revisited countless times before the final image takes form. In both instances, the end result is all the better for the revisions.

For the people of Petite Savanne, I dearly hope that in the final scenario you will once again have hens pecking around your kitchen door.

Building Back Differently.

A *Building Back Better Expo* slated for later this year is expected to do “extraordinary things” in terms of recovering from tropical storm Erika. While we await that initiative, I would like to suggest how we can build back differently.

My suggestions for building back differently are nothing new. In essence, it is how your grandparents would have built back a hundred years ago. Granted, your grandparents would have had an easier task. For the most part they would have been dealing with the vicissitudes of nature and not with disasters compounded by the follies of man. They were also better placed to get up and get on with the job using the materials at hand. There would have expended more sweat but experienced less stress. Human nature is remarkably resilient: within every man, woman and child there is a basic need to begin building back as soon as the dust has settled. Not to sit around waiting.

In your grandparent’s day, very little time would have been spent attending meetings, but more time would have been spent on actually doing the job. For the most part, meetings are a colossal waste of time and hamper creative thinking. Practical solutions are more likely to be developed by a skilled man at the work bench rather than a collective at a meeting. Nowadays, the word workshop conjures up images of boring power-point presentations in hotel conference rooms rather than tools, benches and wood shavings. To build back differently, we need fewer consultants but more craftsmen.

The insight of Dominicans with a life-time’s experience on the ground is often more reliable than advice from overseas. The catastrophic land movement at Antrim - and by knock-on effect, the devastation at Check Hall - are the result of dismissing local knowledge in preference to the flawed advice of an overseas consultant.

Dominica has more natural building resources than any other place on earth. With the exception of steel and cement, we have to hand 90% of the materials needed to re-build. What we lack is the vision and skills to use these resources to their best advantage. The materials that we commonly disdain: native hardwoods, bamboo, stone and clay are the very materials sort after elsewhere for the homes of the affluent avant-garde.

Enlightened architects and planners avoid cutting into hillsides and felling trees. Many of the problems related to land instability can be traced back to forestry clearance and indiscriminate use of the back-hoe. Rivers resist being diverted from their natural course and in their lower reaches they demand space rather than restrictive training walls.

Building back differently may not necessarily mean total relocation. Families have tenacious roots set deep in the land. They were put down by generations past and, regardless of nature’s vicissitudes, they will remain for generations to come. In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Erika, some land will remain untenable into the distant future. However, other areas remain firm. An assessment has to be made to differentiate between the two. Relocating to a “nice piece of flat land” may not be the best solution.

In terms of infrastructure, a major objective should be to reduce vehicular mileage. Driving to work each day from one end of the island to the other makes no sense. Your grandparents lived within walking distance to their place of work. Nowadays, innovated use of Information and Communications Technology can enable many office tasks to be done from home.

The design of major civil engineering works should not be restricted to the drawing board. It is the application of practical knowledge that counts. Fifteen years ago, I was asked to survey the second oldest cast iron bridge in England. It was designed and built over 200 years ago by a local foundry. A single span of 92 feet crosses a river as vulnerable to flooding as the Roseau River. The bridge remains in good condition to this day.

In building back differently Dominica need not follow the lead of others in all things. Our grass is greener and the envy of the rest of the world. We must be wary of mowing it down to accommodate outside influences. In the 1970’s the British Virgin Islands adopted a logo that proudly proclaimed, *Yes, We’re Different*. Now is the time for Dominica to take up that mantle and run with it.

A Culture of Corruption.

The dictionary gives a number of meanings for the word corruption. First, is the one that we are all too familiar with. But it also gives a second meaning, that being: “to harm by errors and alteration”.

It is the secondary meaning that I refer to in this commentary. Whereas the first meaning has the chance of being corrected, the second meaning cannot easily be erased. It is set in concrete.

Sixty years ago, these islands represented one of the most idyllic places on earth. But when I first stumbled across them in the 1970’s the writing was already on the wall. Where previously Road Town’s main street had backed directly onto the shores of a sheltered bay studded with palm fringed cays, there was now a desert of a dredged sand. Ironically, that desert of sand was named after the cays that the ill-conceived dredging had destroyed. This “development” was not perceived for the benefit of Virgin Islanders, but for the profit of foreigners.

If we substitute "cruise-ship dock" for "parking lot", the lyrics of Joni Mitchell's song from the 1970's, could serve as a fitting description of the Wickams Cay 1 and 2 today.

*With a pink hotel, a boutique and a swingin' hot spot,*

*You don't know what you've got till it's gone,*

*They've paved paradise and put in a cruise-ship dock.*

Tourism in the 1960’s was small scale and the BVI remained a niche venue right up to the early 1980’s. None of the developments that followed were initiated by Virgin Islanders. How could they, without the greed of opportunism and finance. At best they benefited by selling their land to the developers and by being employed by them. To the government of the day, it was perceived as progress. And succeeding governments have been only too happy to jump on the bandwagon.

A Different Way of Seeing.

Of all creative art forms, the visual arts are the ones that most enter our lives. They are not restricted to drawing, painting and sculpture but embrace everything we see: our built environment, the clothes we wear and the furniture we sit on, the plate we eat off, the car we drive and the visual image of ourselves.

Regardless of my dyslexic flair for all things visual, going to art school was not an option. I am from a family of engineers and had no option but to followed suit. In retrospect I have no regrets. Since relocating my studio to Dominica, it has been my skills as an engineer that have subsidised my work as an artist and saved me from begging for bread on the streets of Roseau.

After leaving school, my career went as expected until, in my mid-twenties, I gave up a secure job in engineering design, converted the hulk of coal barge into a studio and, with my wife and one-year old daughter, set sail for the French Canals. It was on the pavements of France that I declared myself an artist and the sale my sketches were my family’s means of survival.

In those early days my subject was townscapes, and my first one-man show made a plea for preserving the identity of places. I continued on a similar theme when we sailed to the Caribbean in the 1970’s. It was not palm-fringed beaches that caught my attention but the way of life of the islanders. My books *Virgin Island Sketches* and *Caribbean Sketches* record scenes that have since passed into history.

As the village scenes declined, my work turned towards the islanders. For the paintings and sculptures in my series *Daughters of the Caribbean Sun,* all that I ask of my models is that they should not to disguise their natural features in preference to a foreign concept of beauty. In the words of Marcus Garvey: *…the colour black, natural hair style, and hitherto disparaged Negroid features constitute a new standard of beauty.*

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and I set to work with a vengeance. Regardless of weeks without vehicle access and months without electricity or internet, my output in the years that followed the hurricane amounted to three books, scores of paintings, six sculptures, reams of handmade paper, Caribbean style furniture and innovative architecture. I also made a foray into fashion design.

Some might say the cheek of it! How dare someone who had spent his teenage years at an engineers’ workbench and never a day in art school or college, believe he could take on those varied pursuits. And how dare that same someone, now approaching the age of eighty, have the audacity to believe he can influence the dress of those in their teens and twenties.

But very few that went to art school have since made it as artists, and I doubt that many of those who have studied for a degree in fashion design have become fashion designers. I learnt more about painting and drawing on the pavements of France than I could ever have done at art school. And a lifetime spent depicting the beauty of the nude figure has given me a head start on understanding the female form. My *Bare Minimum* designs are intended for keeping cool in the tropics. They offer a distinctive feminine alternative to tee shirts and torn jeans.

My foray into fashion design gave me the ultimate creative challenge. In all other visual art forms, I have found role models, but in the world of fashion, I could not find a single source that inspired me. Today’s designers appear to be more concerned with freak fashions rather than complimenting the beauty of what lies beneath. I am therefore, visualizing from square one and creating from scratch.

But whatever the art form, creativity by its very nature is different to what has gone before. We mistakenly confuse art with culture. Culture is repetitive; it is something that everyone feels comfortable with. Whereas art can be controversial and not immediately accepted or understood. It amounts to a different way of seeing.

A Pinch of Salt.

A year ago, Baroness Scotland launched the establishment of a Dominica Disaster Resource Center and a Building Back Better Expo that she predicted, “would do extraordinary things”". As the announcement was made on April Fools Day and nothing has happened since, perhaps it was meant to be taken with a pinch of salt.

This is regrettable, not so much for the no-show of a grand event to attract consultants from outside, but for the lost opportunity to harness our own potential from within. In particular it could have given those displaced by the storm a means of having a say in their future. Handing down prescribed solutions from above, rather than involving every man, woman and child at grass root level, has been a major flaw in the attempt to “Build Back Better”.

In essence my suggestions are nothing new, for it is how your grandparents would have built back a hundred years ago. They relied on Dominica’s abundance of natural resources. In contributing their labour, they expended more sweat but experienced less stress. Human nature is remarkably resilient: within every man, woman and child there is a basic need to begin building back as soon as the dust has settled: not to sit around waiting. The fact that earlier generations worked with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows meant that they thought twice before excavating tons of earth. They had a better understanding of the nature of our land and were better skilled at a practical level. The indiscriminate use of today’s backhoe does more harm than good.

In the 1920’s a bridge was built at Macoucherie by local labour and, for the most part, with local materials. That bridge withstood the wrath of Erica and still stands where more recent bridges have failed. Without it there would now be no through vehicular route along the west coast. This begs the question: have we truly advanced?

I doubt that your grandparents would have declared Petite Savanne beyond recall. Rebuilding need not necessarily mean total relocation. True enough, some land will always remain untenable but other areas remain firm. An assessment has to be made to differentiate between the two. Moreover, land on the boarder-line needs to be stabilised. The planting of bamboo (a potential cash crop) and other fast-growing soil-holding species should have begun over a year ago.

Last year the Prime Minister met with the people from Petite Savanne and deemed their village no longer safe. He is quoted as saying: *The idea of this continuous debate of whether we should bring you back to Petite Savanne or not; c’mon; we don’t have to get an expert to tell us that the place is unsafe*. With respect, I firmly believe that the debate for some degree of re-settlement should be kept on the agenda.

On the other hand, I agree that retaining walls are no protection against the wrath of a storm like Erika. A sounder line of defense is better land management and an allowance for rivers to maintain their natural course. The construction of paved roads without sufficient attention to drainage is another destabilising factor.

I can well understand the frustration that prompted a villager to write: “I just can’t wait to be back with my own people”. But a village is more than just people. It is the individuality of places that determines the individuality of ourselves. All too often the completed project on the ground has no resemblance to the artist’s pie-in-the-sky impression.

The Baroness said at the launching ceremony that, “Together we will do something quite extraordinary which has never been seen before”. Let me assure the Baroness that the extraordinary and together components have certainly been seen before. Previously, they were not dependent on visiting missions, consultants and experts: they were a part of Dominica’s heritage.

Building Codes with a Difference.

Up until recent times building codes were not specified by government agencies but lodged in the minds of craftsmen. Experience handed down from father to son, enabled them to build resilient structures from the materials at hand. Skill was an essential component in establishing the longevity of our built heritage.

At this point in time Dominica could benefit from re-establishing these lost arts. Homes built from concrete and plastic are a poor substitute to homes built from our own resources. Stone, lime mortar, hardwood and bamboo are the most resilient materials known to man and these we have in abundance. Buildings constructed from these materials survived Hurricanes David and Maria and storms in earlier times.

The challenge in the short term is to provide temporary housing for those made homeless by Erica and Maria in materials that will not leave a permeant blot on the landscape. Rather than concrete and plastic from overseas we should be innovatively searching for ways to utilize the windfall of fallen trees that Maria has left behind. The end result need not be “third world”. An up-market housing development in England is utilizing imported wood from palm trees. In the States and elsewhere in the world, fallen trees are also being utilised as a viable building material.

Our objective should be to avoid despoiling the island for future generations. Timber can revert back to the soil: concrete and plastic cannot. Housing development should conform to the contours of the land, rather than making the land conform to housing. Furthermore, if our homes and surroundings lack beauty our lives will be lacklustre. We can do without a Dominican version of Pete Seeger’s “Little Boxes”.

Dominica has all the resources to become the world’s foremost self-sufficient small island state. It will mean a major shift in our lifestyle: an acceptance of what Dominica is capable of sustaining. The change cannot be achieved by academic achievement but by putting into practice skills that demand hand and eye coordination. And the change cannot happen overnight. Skills are difficult enough to acquire, and they become all the more difficult to learn when there is no one left to teach.

I began my training at my grandfather’s workbench and went on to serve two apprenticeships. The master craftsmen that I worked under not only taught me my trade but they also instilled in me a love for the broad spectrum of the arts. Hence, a skilled workforce embodies many of the social benefits that we presently sadly lack.

At the same time, we must embrace technology. The loss that I presently feel the most is computer and broadband. The internet is our most valuable learning resource. Before Maria, with on-line advice from experts worldwide, I was near to a breakthrough in processing banana stem fibre, both for paper making and for a thread more valuable than silk. Now the initiative is on hold until communication improves.

My vision for Dominica’s future depends on a combination of traditional skills and new technology. The two are not poles apart but compatible, and for building codes with a difference we need to embrace both. The spacing of rafters alone will not solve the problem but understanding how earlier generations of craftsmen built with the resources at hand will go a long way to finding a solution.

Careers with a Difference.

I’m not sure if the government is a achieving its objective of putting a graduate in each home, but we seem to be well on our way to putting graduates behind the tills in supermarkets. If you don’t believe me, check it out the next time you checkout. I am not referring to students working to supplement their studies, but to graduates with an Associate Degree. It is the same scenario in our call centres. And it doesn’t end there. In the newspaper there is an advertisement for what is in effect a basic machine minder. Educational requirements: at least an Associate Degree in Applied Science or Mechanical Engineering!

Mind you, most engineering graduates wouldn’t know a machine if one feel on their head. And this goes for graduates in all fields that are in essence practical. Up to a hundred years ago it was the master craftsman that determined good design; not at the drawing board but at the workbench. Thomas Telford (1757-1834), the godfather of civil engineering, left school when he was twelve and served his apprenticeship as a stone mason.

I suggest that rather than putting a graduate in each home we put a skilled person in each home. Let me qualify that by saying, a fully skilled person. You cannot learn a skill in six weeks; it takes six years and then some. Moreover, I would like to see a passionate person in each home, and by extension, a creative person in each home. By these means Dominica would begin to experience a new lease of life.

Regardless of the State College’s commendable “empowerment courses” when I look down the long list of subjects on offer, the Creative Arts are for the most part conspicuous by their absence. This is not surprising, as they are largely absent from secondary school syllabuses. Five years ago, when I offered an introductory one-year Visual Art course in collaboration with the Dominica Institute for the Arts, there were no takers. Elsewhere in the world students would have been queuing around the block to enrol!

In conversation with scores of students, either with an Associate Degree, studying for an Associate Degree or having given up on a degree a couple of years into their studies, I found that most wished they had more carefully considered their options on leaving school. As work demands the best years of your life and the best hours of each day, it behoves you to get it right so as to enjoy and find fulfilment in the job you’re doing.

My Lament for a Lost Love.

On the last day of 1988 it was my miserable task to view the remains of a loved one. Her innocent beauty was the victim of a cruel crime. The features that I had known so well were mangled and mutilated beyond recognition. I speak of the footpath that led from Doty to Windy Hill – the footpath that has recently been blasted and bulldozed into a road.

I was not told of her impending doom, although I understand it had been premeditated for years. And after all, I had no legal right to her: she did not belong to me. My status was simply that of an illicit lover, and on quite afternoons we enjoyed our secret affair together.

But those to whom she was vowed did not cherish her. Her charms were lost on them, even though their very ancestors labouriously fashioned her beauty. Did they know, or care, about the unique paved section, about the ruins at Arundel, about her flora and fauna?

But don’t mistake my lament. People should have the right to access their land. The concept of freehold is, to me, as inviolable as the concept of free speech. It must be so. In our economy, taxis and tourists have to be catered for. I am no more in favour of turning the whole island into a National Park, than I am bent on seeing it smothered in concrete. But oh, for some sensitivity and long-term planning to temper our materialistic short-term gains. Alas, these virtues seem deplorably absent.

Land ripe for development! What will you bid? Thirty years ago, my ex-wife’s grandfather sold his best land at Greenbank for $17.14 an acre. He laughed because he thought he’d done well on the deal. At today’s price an acre of land, with road access, above Ballast Bay could well fetch $250.000. But the deal would be no better.

Your grandchildren my inherit the earth and fly to the moon – a miserable place by all accounts – but if they cannot savour the sweet and simple delights of the walk from Doty to Windy Hill, they will have profited nothing. They will be that much impoverished.

You Must Believe in Spring.

In 2001 I was asked to consider ways in which my work as a painter and sculptor could be used to give hope to patients of the cancer care wing at a new hospital in England.

As I pondered on how to fulfil the commission, the lyrics of Maxence’s Song from *The Young Girls of Rochefort* began to haunt me and helped to determine the course my work would take. From the shadow of death and despair my figures would sing to high heaven in praise of life.

One of the UK sculptures is a life-size figure seen through a vortex of autumn leaves. It represents spring emerging from winter. We don’t have the same winters and springs in the Caribbean but yesterday I gathered the fallen leaves from around my studio and used them to adorn one of the sculptures in my series *Daughters of the Caribbean Sun.* In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lyrics may help to give hope for tomorrow.

*When lonely feeling fills the meadows of your mind,*

*Just think when winter comes can spring be far behind.*

*Beneath the deepest snows*

*The secret of a rose*

*Is that it merely knows,*

*You must believe in spring.*

*Just as a tree is sure its leaves will reappear,*

*It knows its emptiness is just the time of year.*

*The frozen mountain streams*

*Of April’s melted dreams,*

*How crystal clear it seems,*

*You must believe in spring.*

*You must believe in love and trust it’s on its way,*

*Just as the sleeping rose awaits the kiss of May.*

*So in a world of snow,*

*Of things that come and go,*

*Where what you think you know*

*You can’t be certain of.*

*You must believe in spring and love.*

One Skill Leads to Another.

In the first world war my grandfather won medals for “Work at the Forge”. In peace time he repaired clocks, church organs and steam traction engines. His lifetime’s work epitomized how one skill leads to another. Five hundred years ago Leonardo da Vinci was a painter, poet, musician, sculptor, architect, engineer, inventor and diplomat.

My introduction to craftmanship began at my grandfather’s workbench and then progressed to my father’s workbench. When, at the age of fifteen, I began a seven-year apprenticeship in mechanical engineering, I was already an old hand at many of the skills that have been essential to my life’s work.

The skills and specialist tools I inherited from my grandfather came in useful for a project that is the subject of this commentary.

Last year, a neighbour offered my wife a piano for nothing more than the cost of taking it away. It entered my workshop in a depressed state and had I known in advance the extent of the damage caused by rats, woodworm and ravages of the Caribbean climate, I doubt that I would have attempted the task. Thankfully, the invaders stopped short at the sound board, otherwise all would have been lost. Neither could they get their teeth into the cast iron frame.

I traced the maker’s name and model to a London piano factory that had gone out of business in the 1950’s. The piano has a good pedigree and by an amazing coincidence, two of the machines in my workshop began life in the very factory where it was built. Thus, the piano and the machines that made it, were reunited after seventy years right here in Dominica!

I have worked on pianos in the past, but nothing anywhere near as involved as this. The restoration involved dismantling and re-assembling 1,200 parts that make up the piano’s action – an intricate mechanism that transfers the motion of each depressed key to the strings. I also had to make a replacement key bed and key frame. This is the base on which the 88 keys sit. The original had crumbled to dust, leaving me without reference to its dimensions and the precise position of 176 steel pins on which the keys locate and pivot. I designed this crucial component from scratch and constructed it to a tolerance of a few thousands of an inch. The smooth playing of a piano depends upon its accuracy.

There are no replacement piano parts available in Dominica and importing items from overseas is expensive and time consuming. Hence, the need to improvise and replicate parts in my workshop. This included making a machine for winding replacement bass strings. The inner steel piano wire I had to import, but for the outer windings I recycled copper from the old strings and from electric motor armatures. A disused washing motor provided the exact copper wire diameter for A2 sharp. Regardless of improvised materials, my "Made in Dominica" strings tune to an acceptable tone and pitch.

The moral of this story is that skills and creativity are a necessary component for our economic and social wellbeing. If they are given the attention they deserve, Dominica would be less dependent on imports and foreign aid.

Creating the Means of a Livelihood.

A sustainable rural livelihood can be defined as follows:

*A livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable and can cope and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation…* (Robert Chambers & Gordon Conway)

If there is one piece of God’s earth that has all the resources for sustainable livelihoods, it must surely be Dominica. Yet instead of getting on with the job we run around in circles and struggle to make ends meet. Could it be that we need to rethink the way we go about making a living?

Our perception of employment is modelled on other countries, rather than on our own assets and capabilities. The same goes for our lifestyle. It is no good hankering after a way of life and a way of working that is insupportable for our 72,000 population and incompatible to our 290 square mile island home.

What I have in mind goes beyond cottage industry and beyond making craft items for visitors. The products would be essential for everyday living and manufactured to meet local and regional demand. It could be something as simple as an environmentally friendly egg carton. At the other end of the scale, I have on the drawing board a vehicle specifically designed for tropical environments and island terrine. Unlike the current crop of SUV’s, it has no fancy devices. But it does have good looks, ground clearance, stability, easy maintenance and low fuel consumption. Moreover, it could be assembled from component parts right here in Dominica. Sorry, I’m dyslexic and my brain can’t function the same as a normal person.

Regardless of my flights of fancy, manufacturing must relate to our abundant resources: resources that the rest of the world would give an arm and a leg for. A significant percentage of what we import could be produced locally from our own raw materials and with a surplus to export. And this is not limited to agriculture, although exporting rather than importing fruit juice would be a good start. With innovative and creative thinking, we have the wherewithal to make paper and paper products (thus eliminating plastic and polystyrene) and building materials that are not totally reliant on imported cement and steel.

To create a livelihood, we do not need large factories or industrial estates. Environmentally friendly small-scale units, village to village, would be more efficient and better suited to our nature island image. Neither do we need High-Tec machinery but we do need high quality. Given a team of skilled mechanical engineers the equipment can be designed, built and maintained on island. A few years ago, I designed a machine for washing dasheen. It worked entirely by gravity and water pressure: no electricity and no moving parts. As you might guess, it was cast aside in favour of an imported “State of the Art” energy consuming device.

I am not advocating that we return to the dark ages. As an engineer I embrace technology and as an artist, I believe that all work should be creative and pleasurable. The internet enables information to be shared world-wide and offers un-tapped potential for working from the home environment.

My approach to developing livelihoods would reap benefits beyond material advantages. Skills would be developed along with job satisfaction and pride of accomplishment. Keeping the workplace within easy reach of home - walking distance, rather than a one-hour bus ride - would have benefits in terms of health and wellbeing. Moreover, Dominicans would be working for their own improvement, rather than to the advantage of an overseas conglomerate.

By keeping a vernacular identity, we enhance Dominica as a visitor destination. We are blest with the raw materials for sustainable livelihoods. What we desperately need is the creative vision and skill to use these resources to our best advantage.

Entrepreneurial Solutions.

Beyond an innovative product, what a start-up business needs most is an efficient and economical means of production. According to recent press releases, training sessions, bank loans and grants appear to be in abundance but no one is mentioning the means of production, whether it is on the kitchen table or the factory floor.

When I am asked to advise businesses in Dominica, I invariably find that it is not improvements in the product or the workforce that are needed, but improvements to the way the job is being done. These improvements do not necessarily need a huge amount of capital but what is needed is an orderly workplace and logical thinking.

Some years ago, I offered a series of training sessions for the private and public sector. They were titled, “Good Workshop Practice”. Personnel from the Fire and Ambulance Service attended one of the sessions. The next day I received a phone call from the Chief Fire Officer to say, “Mr Burnett, I don’t know what you did to my men yesterday, but first thing this morning they tidied their workshop!”.

If the workplace is in a state of confusion, the product or service will follow suit. As an apprentice I was told that you can judge a workman by the state of his workbench. Visitors to my workshop remark on its state of order and cleanliness. My response is that I run a precision engineering workshop, not a scrapyard. One of my machines did service in the Second World War. It remains in pristine condition and is as accurate today as was then. The chances are that it will still be giving good service in another eighty year’s time. But the same cannot be said of machines manufactured more recently. Like automobiles, they are not built to last.

Fifty-five years ago, my work as a design engineer included what was then known as Work Study. In this context the term work study is not related to providing students with job experience but rather a means of improving methods of working by observing the work in progress. Incidentally, it was a woman, Lillian Gilbreth (1878-1972), who is recognized as the innovator in this field. She focused on the importance of the worker and the arrangement of the workplace, rather than on machinery.

Some years ago, a product that was intended to be packaged by machine was being packed by hand. I observed the six women doing the job and found that one was packaging twice as fast as the rest but with less effort. To get each member of the team working to the same efficiency all it required was the reorganization of the workplace: packaging material close at hand, correct table height and comfortable seating.

On another production line, a bottle washing machine was so inefficient and dangerous in terms of stoppages and breakages that I calculated the same number of operators could do the job safer, better and faster by hand. Low-cost jigs and fixtures can be more effective than complicated machines for small scale production runs. They don’t break down and they don’t consume electricity.

Some contraptions that pass as machinery in Dominica, ingenious though they might seem at first glance, resemble a Heath Robinson device. Unfortunately, we do not have an abundance of skilled practical mechanical engineers. By the time a faulty part reaches my workshop a ham-fisted “big hammer” attempt at repair has made it unrepairable.

Simple mechanisms, made in my workshop here in Dominica, have increased the output of small businesses and larger manufacturers up to tenfold. There are no computer components to fail, no complicated mechanisms to break down and no expensive parts to be replaced and ordered from overseas. The recipient of a device for taking the hit and miss out of slicing trays of bread pudding was overjoyed and considered it a minor miracle.

My advice to those setting up a small business is to resist being lured into purchasing sophisticated equipment that the manufacture claims will work wonders. Use the internet to research alternatives and source customer feedback. In the Caribbean if anything can go wrong it will go wrong, so keep things simple.

Life Beyond the Common Entrance.

This week, in the small minority of homes of children that won bursaries or scholarships in the Common Entrance Examination there will be jubilation and resignation in the homes of the majority that did not.

In what follows I want to give hope and assurance to those that the testing methodology failed. To my mind, it was not the children that failed the exam but the exam that failed the children. Furthermore, I maintain that grooming a child from the age of nine for that kind of examination ranks as a form of child abuse.

Sir William Henry Hadow, an educational reformer who in the 1920’s recommended the introduction of primary and secondary schools in the UK, would doubtless agree. His report, progressive for its day, argued that:

The primary school curriculum should be based on the children’s knowledge and experience, not on abstract generalisations or theoretical principles. It should be thought of in terms of activity and experience, rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored. A good primary school is not a place of compulsory instruction.

The Caribbean Common Entrance Examination is a colonial hand-me-down from the UK’s 11 Plus. The Eleven Plus Examination dates from 1945 when the Tripartite System introduced three types of secondary school, namely: grammar school, secondary technical school and secondary modern school. It was abolished in the 1970’s when all schools went Comprehensive.

As at this point in time Dominica does not have a similar Tripartite System – all children progress to the same level of secondary education – the only function of the Common Entrance Examination is as a financial incentive in the form of bursaries and scholarships and as a first choice of secondary school. It therefore beggars belief why we put children through the stress of the examination at that tender age. Subsequent streaming can be determined from regular class results.

As a confidence builder it serves only a small percentage of pupils. For the majority it serves as life’s first major “put-down”. Research has shown that it takes ten “up-lifts” to counter one “put-down”. It is an early differentiating step between the “have nots” and what a government minister recently termed as “those who are in higher positions in the social space”.

In essence the Common Entrance Examination is an Intelligence Test and as such it has the major failing of all intelligence tests: it cannot measure creativity. Neither can it measure the co-ordination between hand and eye, an essential attribute for all skilled work. A creative answer is marked as nought. Hence, a dyslexic child hasn’t a cat in hell chance, and up to 15% of Afro-Caribbean children are dyslexic. To that you can add at least 40% of pupils who are creatively rather than academically inclined.

Research indicates that children are born with 98% the creative potential of genius. However, as they go through life, the figure falls dramatically. At the age of eight, the percentage has dropped to 32%. By the time they reach thirteen, peer pressure has brought it down to 10%, and by adulthood, conformity has reduced it to less than 2%. As individuals and as a nation, creativity is our most valuable resource. Creative thinking enhances academic qualifications, but it is not necessarily dependent on them.  
Incidentally, the syllabuses of Dominica’s two most sought after secondary schools largely omit the Creative Arts.

Five years ago, Dominica piloted the Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment as a possible alternative to the Common Entrance Examination. As the same elements of the assessment are spread over a period of years, rather than on the result of a one-off nerve-racking exam, it offers some improvement. Nevertheless, it still misses the point: that being, what’s the point if all children are eligible for the same level of secondary education.

Let me end by offering hope to the majority that did not get a high test score by confessing that seventy years ago I failed the 11 Plus, and you can add that I am dyslexic. In those days dyslexia was not understood. We were put down as being dumb; albeit that in the year leading up to the exam I designed and built a model aircraft with a 30 inch wing span that could fly the length of a football field!

The “sink” secondary modern school that I attended was later closed by the government as failing. But it certainly did not fail me. If I had my life to live over, I would beg to be sent back to the same school. A remarkable bunch of teachers restored my confidence and in four years I rose from bottom of the bottom stream to top of the top stream. Those teachers, none of them highly academically qualified, were the first to recognise my potential in the Arts and Engineering Design. I have since won national awards in both fields.

On the other hand, my best friend Brian remained at the bottom of the class and when he left school the only job open to him was sweeping up in a bakery. Years later, on a visit to my home town in England, I looked twice at the smartly dressed man walking towards me: it was Brian, also home on a visit. Over the years he had progressed from sweeper to Master Baker. He then progressed to hotel catering and when we met, he was the Head Pastry Chef at one of Australia’s top hotels. As he said: they tried to teach me everything at school but missed the one thing that I’m good at!

My School Report.

At this time of year, I try to give hope to those children that our teaching syllabuses and assessments have failed. As our Common Entrance Examination is a colonial hand-me-down, I submit as evidence my report card from 66 years ago – the year I failed the now defunct UK Eleven Plus.

Although I came next to the bottom in the class, the fact that I am with you today as a painter and sculptor is thanks to Miss Atack, my primary school teacher. She was the first to recognize my flair for art. The fact that I was eventually able to excel in all subjects, is thanks to Miss Shepard, my remarkable secondary school headmistress. She diagnosed dyslexia before the word came into common usage. I was no longer perceived as dumb but different - just as Leonardo da Vinci, Auguste Rodin, Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein were dyslexic and different.

In 1953, the year of my report card, England was still recovering from World War II and my school was located in the impoverished North of England. Nevertheless, subjects were heavily slanted towards the creative arts: literature, poetry, handwork, needlework, music and art. These subjects were also featured in the syllabus at my so called “sink” secondary modern school.

How many schools in Dominica can make a similar claim? When I offered free Saturday morning classes in the visual arts for secondary school students, the response from one headmistress was: “My girls do not have time for that sort of thing”. This year, through the Ministry of Education, I offered free workshops at my studio for students taking CSE in Art. Despite numerous reminders, my offer has not even been acknowledged, let alone acted upon. Our State College and UWI Campus offer nothing in the arts - period.

West Indians have the world’s highest incidence of dyslexia (15%) and 40% of pupils are creatively, rather than academically inclined. Thus, over 50% of our children are being shortchanged by the current education system. These are the very children that, as adults, could significantly contribute to making Dominica the envy of the Caribbean.

But schooling aside, parents must also realise that their child’s needs may not equate to their own ambitions. Coming from a family of engineers, my father was initially none too pleased that his son was inclined towards art. A seven-year engineering apprenticeship was meant to nip that in the bud. Likewise, I doubt if many Dominican parents willingly want their offspring to be another Pablo Picasso or Roger Burnett.

Civilisations are built on creativity and so is the wellbeing of society. Twenty years ago, a mixed-race school on the outskirts of London had all the usual problems of low grades, bullying, truancy and antisocial behaviour. Then there came on the scene a headmistress who might have been Miss Atack and Miss Shepard reincarnated. She placed art, drama and music at the core of the school’s agenda with amazing effect. It was not long before the school’s steel band played at the Royal Festival Hall and her pupils performed in *The Merchant of Venice* at Shakespear’s Globe Theatre. Her strategy of embracing the arts had a marked effect on academic achievement. Results for English, Science, Mathematics and History were above the national average. School inspectors cited pupil confidence, high moral, pride of achievement and exemplary behaviour.

I have witnessed a similar success story here in the Caribbean. In the 1980’s two music teachers from Canada, a husband and wife team, came to the British Virgin Islands and started a school orchestra from scratch. Students had to save up to buy their own instruments and the orchestra’s repertoire ranged from the classics to jazz. The village baker’s son, a boy of enormous girth and by no means academically inclined, became a maestro on the tuba. At the end of the couple’s two-year contract the orchestra made a tour of cities in the United States to rave reviews.

I know for a fact that we have the raw creative talent here in Dominica. But to achieve similar success stories we urgently need to reassess our concept of education achievement.

The Art of Environment.

Five hundred years ago the painter and sculptor was also the engineer, architect, town planner, philosopher and poet. Hence, the glory of the Renaissance. Today, we are taught to specialize in one thing and creative thought and solutions count for naught.

To combat the dreariness of our surroundings and the increasing dreariness of our lives, we need to re-establish those all-embracing skills. In doing so we enable a desperately needed grass-roots art form to develop: the art of environment.

The art of the environment and, by extension, the art of townscape, is all about preserving the identity of places and not allowing Dominica to become the same as everywhere else. The defence of the individuality of places is the defence of the individuality of ourselves. It is not just about the design of buildings and other structures, but rather about how they are arranged to create a dramatic sense of place and belonging.

We must be cautious of allowing others to conceive the content of our environment and purchasing it off-the-peg in one-size-fits-all. We must regain confidence in the wellspring of our own being.

But you may ask: isn’t this the job of the Planning Department?

Gordon Cullen (1914-1994), who wrote the definitive book on the subject\*, began his working career right here in the Caribbean as a frustrated town planner. No doubt some of our own planners feel equally frustrated. Art, for in essence that is what we’re talking about, cannot be tied down within a government department and decided upon by committees. Committees are the death knell of creative thought and creative solutions.

To explain what the Art of Environment is all about, let me tell you what it is not:

* Cars parked on pavements.
* Street lights along rural roads.
* A Civic Square for car parking.
* Housing estates that comprise of rows of identical “little boxes”.
* Town houses for villagers that previously grew their own provisions.
* Derelict vehicles on the roadside.
* Bogus beautification.

The Art of Environment is all-inclusive both in content and participation. The content ranges from seemingly minor details, like the lettering on street signs, to imaginative planning for our towns and villages. The participants include every man, woman and child.

Seven years ago, I responded to the government’s request for designs for a Roseau River Promenade. However, as I am neither a contractor, architect or town planner, my submission was not deemed eligible. Pity, as the best idea for a major UK regeneration initiative came not from the experts sat around a board room table but from a housewife standing in the queue at the Post Office.

My idea for a Roseau River Promenade is different in that it looks at a broader picture. It includes re-developing the area alongside the river. Within that area we could create a new Market Square enclosed by multifunctional buildings – shops below, offices and residences above – buildings that reflect our Caribbean vernacular, rather than a pastiche of styles from elsewhere. Thus, the creation of a new heart for Roseau and a vibrant focal point for citizens and visitors. The land occupied by the present Roseau Market could be converted into an adjoining carpark and bus terminal, together with an unobstructed through route for north bound traffic.

This is the kind of all-embracing initiative that the Art of the Environment is all about.

The Identity of Places.

The environment that Dominicans cherish and yearn to preserve for future generations differs from the reality. I predict that your grandchildren and great grandchildren will live to abhor the current spate of alien housing estates and apartment blocks that are disfiguring the landscape. I am all for housing, but housing in accord with Dominica, rather than an alien concept of what our built environment and lifestyle should be like.

But the so-called housing revolution continues unabated. Recently the Prime Minister announced that very soon he will be unveiling a massive housing complex for young professionals on land owned by Dominica Social Security at Warner.

This isn’t the first time that Warner has been considered ripe for development. In 2008 the Dominica Social Security Board invited Physical Planners and/or Environmental Planners to submit proposals for a Community Development Plan for its 209 acres of land at Warner. Importantly, the brief stated that the design must be in keeping with the existing Zoning and Land Use Policy developed by the Planning Division and should serve to enhance the Nature Island image of Dominica.

Fifteen years ago, my mail was being forwarded to the Warner village Post Office and I got to know and love the locality. As the Pre-Planning Brief cited knowledge of terrain and experience in doing similar projects, I felt qualified to make a submission.

My development plan included residential, commercial and agricultural components together with conserved tracts of countryside to serve as a local amenity and visitor attraction. These four criteria can be headed:

* Means of Livelihood
* Community Fulfilment
* Environmental Compatibility
* Pride of Place

A means of livelihood is a fundamental requirement of life. The plan must therefore investigate how this component can best serve the local community. To have large numbers of workers living in outlying settlements and commuting back and forth to Roseau every day is not a viable option. We now have the technology to stem this flow and the means to modify the way we work.

Community fulfilment cannot be prescribed. The bricks and mortar of houses, community centres, clinics, churches and schools are assets, but they do not in themselves create a sense of community. Community fulfilment comes about when people have a vested interest in where and how they live. The greater the self-sufficiency of a community, the greater the fulfilment of that community.

The physical components of the plan must fit comfortably into the landscape. Dominica’s status as the Nature Island of the Caribbean is dependant not only on the natural environment, but equally on the sensitivity of the built environment.

Pride of place is the hallmark of a happy, healthy and thriving community. It is closely linked to the identity of place. This identity can take many forms: historical, cultural, industrial, architectural and environmental.

It comes as no surprise that my submission was not acknowledged or responded to. However, I hope that the young professionals that the Prime Minister has in mind will have a vision and a voice of their own. Perhaps they will understand that the identity of places reflects the identity of ourselves.

The Relevance of the Visual Arts.

The recent launch of Dominica’s National Art Gallery begs the question: what is the relevance of the visual arts in Dominica.

I made the question the subject of an evening panel discussion three years ago at my exhibition “A New Lease of Life”. The venue was the Old Mill, the five panellists were distinguished in the arts, and the event was free and widely publicised. Perhaps the answer was made conspicuously clear by audience attendance: no one showed up!

It was the same story when I attempted to introduce a full-time Pre-Degree Course in the Visual Arts at the launch of the Dominica Institute for the Arts. The syllabus was based on an award-winning course that I had contributed to in the UK. The fees matched those of the State College and twelve participants would have made the initiative financially viable. Anywhere else in the world students would have been queuing around the block to enrol. In Dominica there were no takers!

More recently, I set up an interactive website specifically with Dominican CXC students in mind. But regardless of free tablets and internet access, my “Notes for Art Students” had virtually no local followers, nor any interest from the Department of Education. In contrast, my on-line diary pages are accessed by thousands of art students, artists and art lovers world-wide.

I could add more examples, but let me get down to what I perceive is the reason for the apathy. Fundamentally, there is little understanding of what art is all about. In Dominica we tend to confuse art with culture. Culture is something we all do and feel comfortable with: it may instil pride but not necessarily deep thought; it preserves rather than creates. Art is individualistic and often controversial: it questions accepted beliefs and breaks new ground.

Over a hundred years ago the American artist Robert Henri wrote:

*…You do not have to be a painter or sculptor to be an artist. Art, when really understood, is the province of every human being. Art Galleries will not make a country art conscious, but where there is the art spirit there will be precious work to fill galleries…The artist disturbs, upsets, enlightens and opens the way for a better understanding. Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it and shows there are still more pages to follow…*

It would help if parents had a different mind-set towards education. Too often it is the parent’s aspiration that instils a preference for academic rather than creative subjects. Dominica does not necessarily need more lawyers but we do desperately need more people who are creatively skilled.

As individuals and as a nation, creativity is our most valuable resource. In answer to the reason for our apathy towards the visual arts, Dominica’s preeminent art icon told me recently: Roger, we’re just not ready!

Roseau: A Radical Rethink.

Noisy, dirty, smelly, sweltering, congested, nowhere to safely walk and nowhere to park.

These are the impressions that the City of Roseau imparts in the minds of most residents and visitors. To begin with, the grandiose title of city – which under British rule may have been earned by virtue of its diocesan cathedral – is misleading. In reality, Roseau is a market town, the layout of which has not significantly changed since the 19th century. Its streets and narrow lanes were laid out for horse and handcarts, not motorcars. If fever had not ravaged Portsmouth in earlier times, Roseau would not have become the capital of Dominica. Valid reasons can now be made for the capital to revert back to Portsmouth, but until that day arrives, we need to radically rethink Roseau.

My suggestion for building the new library in the town center, was a bone of contention for many readers. However, I qualified my suggestion by stating that many areas of Roseau are in need of development and that we urgently need a comprehensive development plan. Such a plan would protect buildings of historical worth, encourage regeneration and guard against the piecemeal development that is presently blighting Roseau’s townscape.

Recently we have become adept at putting the right things in the wrong place: the sports stadium being one example and the Chinese Bridge another. Furthermore, we have become enamoured with architecture that bears no relationship to our location. Vernacular architecture need not equate to being outmoded. What is right for Dubai isn’t necessarily right for a small island in the Caribbean. Incidentally, the Carnegie Library building does not reflect British colonial architecture but rather the 18th century timber framed buildings of North America.

Roseau has features which, if imaginatively developed, would make other cities envious. It has sea and river frontage together with a dramatic mountainous backdrop. The town center is compact and given shade, can be easily traversed on foot. On the other hand, Roseau’s open street drains have no place in this day and age and pavements should not serve as ad hoc carparks. Traffic congestion can be significantly reduced by re-routing through traffic, but not along the Bay Front or through the Botanic Gardens. There is an alternative route staring us in the face. Large cities overcome their parking problems by “park and ride” initiatives, whereas our small scale offers the better alternative of “park and walk”.

There is need for a Roseau Development Plan. In 2005 Baptiste & Associates Ltd., a local company located right here in Dominica, produced [a 383-page development plan](https://physicalplanning.gov.dm/images/ROSRoseau%20Development%20Plan.pdf). But being locally conceived, as against originating in Barbados or Dubai, it has been largely ignored.

Unless an up-to-date development plan is formulated and implemented, Roseau will sink further into urban decay. The identity of places reflects the identity of ourselves, and I doubt that Dominicans want the opening sentence of this commentary to apply to their homeland. Surely the task is to create a town center that is worthy of an exemplary modern library. In the meantime, a restored Carnegie library building – and the grounds within which it stands – could serve as a fitting venue for a host of cultural programs.

The New Library.

The plans for a new library have changed radically since the SHAPE (Society for Historic Architectural Preservation & Enhancement) press release three weeks ago. The Dubia based Montreal Managements Consultants design now appears to have been put on hold, together with the idea of incorporating a dance floor and recording studio within a new library building. There is nothing wrong with going back to the drawing board. Indeed, it’s a commendable step towards getting it right. However, what we are now faced with is a hastily conceived design competition.

All of the discussions to date have put the cart before the horse. There are two separate and distinct issues involved: the preservation of an important historical building and the pressing need for a new purpose-built library. The restoration of the Carnegie Library should not be compromised by planting a new library within its grounds. A more suitable location for the new library can be found within Roseau’s city center.

If you walk the streets of Roseau, you will realize that many areas of the city are in urgent need of sympathetic development. For Dominicans overseas, a glance at the google satellite image of Roseau will confirm what I say. Furthermore, there exists a vacant building that could be readily converted into a modern library. But first and foremost, we urgently need a comprehensive development plan for the city. Such a plan would protect buildings of historical worth, encourage regeneration and guard against the piecemeal development that is blighting Roseau’s townscape. Such a plan is surely one of the fundamental functions of Physical Planning.

When the option of an alternative site for a new library has been explored, the idea of a design competition can be revisited. However, a competition is not the best way of arriving at a good design, either for the commissioners or the competitors. All but one of the competitors has to work for free; only the winner gets the prize money. And even that is not guaranteed, for the commissioners may decide that none of the submissions meet their approval. To better their chances, competitors tend to play safe and produce what they perceive the commissioners want. Ultimately, design competitions stifle creativity.

Having said that, a revised concept brief should take into account Dominican architects practicing with distinction overseas and Dominican students presently at university studying for a degree in architecture. Also, the qualifications required for entry should also be reconsidered. Many of the world’s most talented architects, had they been born here and lived here, would not be eligible as they have had no formal training. Frank Lloyd Wright, the esteemed American architect, is a prime example. At its best, architecture is 75% art and 25% structural engineering. As with museums and art galleries, the design of libraries calls for expert knowledge that goes beyond building four walls. Specialists need to be consulted and their recommendations taken on board.

It is unfortunate that the structure of the historic Carnegie Library was left unprotected after the hurricane and that the building has never been granted protected status. I hope that a restored Carnegie Library – in its original setting – and an exemplary new library in the city center, will be our legacy for future generations.

Before It’s Too Late.

Almost two weeks have passed since SHAPE issued a press release that expressed alarm for lack of consultation in the design of a new library.

Before the debate on the new public library becomes last month’s news, I urge DNO to follow up with further images and insights into the rationale that has determined the course of the project. I assume that in addition to the artist’s rendition, there are detailed plans.

As I see it, two separate and distinct issues are involved: the preservation of an important historical building, the pressing need for a new purpose-built library.

The need for a dance floor and recording studio are not necessarily related to the above.

The original library building is a core component of what is left of Roseau’s historical identity and as such is irreplaceable. Almost two years ago Darren Louis, in a letter to the Physical Planning Division, suggested that under section 47 (1) of the Physical Planning Act of 2002 an interim preservation order be put in place to protect the interests of the building and by extension Dominica’s history.

If sympathetically restored the building could serve for hosting exhibitions and meetings. In the past a number of groups have struggled to find a suitable venue within their financial means. For many of these events ambience is an important factor.  Moreover, under the skilled supervision, the restoration could serve to train a new generation of master craftsmen.

Although a dance floor and recording studio may be considered essential amenities, they need not be housed in a new library building. For many reasons, they are best kept separate. They are different entities that cannot be successfully accommodated by a ground floor, first floor, second floor plan. A library requires tranquillity, music requires acoustics, and a dance floor has its own specific design requirements. Furthermore, I doubt that the ground floor of the proposed building would be able to accommodate a lending library, reference library, the national archives, study space, store rooms and offices.

The construction of a new library has been on the agenda for years. In 2011, after a visit to Azerbaijan, Prime Minister said that discussions were held with officials from that Euro-Asian country on the possibility of it funding a national state-of-the-art library in Dominica. Then again, in 2014 the Prime Minister said arrangements were being set in place for the construction of a new library, however assistance from the public was being sought for an ideal location. He said he had received a design for the new library but was not satisfied with it.

Dominica deserves a modern purpose-built library, but not within the grounds of the historic building. And being modern does not necessarily mean forgoing our Caribbean identity in favour of an alien, Dubai inspired design. The identity of our built environment reflects the identity of ourselves. There are young Dominican architects immerging, both at home and abroad, that could contribute with distinction.

Incidentally, a bold but alternative solution is to let the State House serve as the new library and the restored historic Carnegie library building serve for hosting government receptions. I am sure that visiting dignitaries would be impressed by being entertained in a building of cultural and historical significance and they would be equally impressed by what would then be an impressive new library across the road. This arrangement would help to solve the parking problem for library users and the vulnerability of housing irreplaceable archives in the original library building.

The concept and plans for the new library will affect Dominicans for generations to come. It is therefore essential that they are openly debated. If we now turn our backs on the issue the likelihood is that within a few weeks bulldozers will move in and we will be presented with a *fait accompli*.

Education Through Art.

Regardless of the predictable constructional delay, the "new" British Virgin Island High School building is already outdated in terms of its ability to accommodate the new concepts that are desperately needed in education. Actually, the "new concepts" are not all that new. They date back to when Herbert Read published his ground-breaking book "Education Through Art" eighty years ago.

The Caribbean is rich in natural resources but lacking in the one essential human resource that is needed to benefit from this abundance: that is, the ability to think and work creatively. Given the importance of creativity and the fact that the majority of children are creatively, rather than academically inclined, we would benefit if our schools and colleges gave more attention to the subject.

Nor should it be limited to what is perceived art. My work as an engineer demands just as much creative input as does my work as a sculptor and painter.  Creative thinking enhances academic qualifications but it is not necessarily dependent on them.

Apart from a technical block - presumably focused on motor mechanics - and a small amphitheatre, the new building appears to be a warren of regimented classrooms. I see nothing in the plans that caters for the creative arts in general: music, dance, fashion design, architecture, theatre, ceramics, painting, sculpture, carpentry, etc.

To think and work creatively demands courage, vision, initiative, innovation and resourcefulness. It thrives on doing rather than theorizing. Creativity fosters individuality and resists regimentation. Specialization and rote learning hamper the all-embracing aspect of creativity and committees are its death knell.

Perhaps the new school was designed by a committee!

Paradise Lost.

In 1975, while sailing north through the Caribbean, stormy weather caused me to take shelter in the British Virgin Islands. The anchorage off Road Town was exposed and uncomfortable and I was told of a sheltered cove a few miles along the coast. Its entrance was narrow but once inside the surrounding reef offered perfect protection. My intention was to continue on my way as soon as the weather improved. The weather did improve but I stayed on, and that idyllic cove became my home port for the next twenty years.

In the British Virgin Islands much is made about Belonger Status. However, Somerset Maugham in his book “The Moon and Sixpence” speaks about a deeper sense of belonging:

*…Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs. Here is the home he sought, and he will settle amid scenes he has never seen before, among men he has never known, as though they were familiar to him from his birth.*

I collected the material for my book “Virgin Island Sketches” during the early years of my stay. It celebrates the way of life of the islanders and my sketches now serve as a reminder of those halcyon times past.

While I was busy preserving scenes from the past, Virgin Island poet Sheila Hyndman (1958-1991) was prophesizing the future.

*They will come with tools and machines.*

*They will bring to light your secret places,*

*They will demand your mysteries.*

*They will destroy, build up.*

*They will dilute your treasures,*

*And rob you of your chastity.*

I shared Sheila’s love of her homeland and in the years that followed I contributed my own work to that end. But as the 1980’s progressed I found it increasingly difficult to relate the past to the future. The maxim “Yes, We’re Different” was being cast aside in favour of being the same as everywhere else. I began to realise that much of the development taking place was for the benefit of foreign entities. It had begun with the Wickams Cay reclamation project in the 1960’s and more recently, financial services and mass tourism. Although the islands are undoubtedly financially better off than when I first knew them, in the process of acquiring that transient wealth, Virgin Islanders have lost more than they gained.

My disillusionment of what was perceived as progress became all the more acute in the year that I travelled the region in search of material for my book “Caribbean Sketches”. As with my earlier book, I was working against the clock in attempting to capture each island before it degenerated into being the same as everywhere else. Cruise ship passengers step ashore to the same spurious scene as at every port of call. We tend to forget that the individuality of places reflects the individuality of ourselves.

As my journey through the region progressed, I found that the fundamental problem faced by Caribbean small island states was not one of self-governance, but one of self-sufficiency. Even on islands that have claimed independence and are rich in natural resources, the islanders themselves have not benefitted. Rather than farming the land, the present generation prefer to sit at a desk or serve tourists. To finance an alien lifestyle, their governments sell passports to foreigners and become deeply beholden to the People’s Republic of China. In real terms, these islands are less independent now than they were a hundred years ago.

Self-sufficiency for small island states relates to lifestyle expectations. Three generations ago hard work was the order of the day and the islanders lived within their means. Since then, there has been a hankering for a westernized lifestyle and a reliance of wealth generated by foreign economies.

The fundamental challenge at this point in time is to seriously question the direction that the British Virgin Islands and the region in general has taken. We need to re-evaluate the past in order to determine if what was originally perceived as "development" has in fact been in the best long-term interest of the islanders.

To correct the mistakes of the past and to start all over again verges on the impossible. In more ways than one, the past is set in concrete - and concrete is a difficult material to break down. Nevertheless, a re-assessment of values is a necessary first step towards rediscovering a paradise lost.

For otherwise, as Sheila wrote: “…*all that’s left of your true self will be an old and forgotten poem like mine.”*

The Extended Family.

In the past I had mistaken one of the alleged virtues of the West Indian lifestyle. I had confused the strength of the extended family with that of the actual family. I now realise that the two – relations on one hand, man and wife on the other – are in fact opposite and opposed. The extended family, as it exists today in the Caribbean, is destructive to the family itself. It has made the legitimate family almost obsolete. Marriage is a handicap that most West Indians can do without.

The West Indian male has been made the scapegoat for the deficiency of married life, but the real fault has its roots in the extended family. It is a social structure that allows him to evade responsibility; it stifles his development and keeps him immature. The same circumstances prevent the West Indian woman from wholeheartedly entering married life. In the extended family, roles become confused, and members meddle in each other’s business. This is not only detrimental to the development of individuals; it can be ruinous to the marriage. Partners tend to cleave to their parents or siblings, rather than to each other. One church minister, with more insight than most, has cited it as the scourge of marriages in the region.

The extended family in the first instance, makes marriage unnecessary. When a man makes a woman pregnant, and when she gives birth to their child, neither considers the burden of parenting to be totally their responsibility. A grandmother, younger sister, or any family member that may be available, expects – and are expected – to help out considerably. There is no stigma attached to this state of affairs. It is the accepted norm.

If a couple do marry, the same circumstances soon undermine their independence. The extended family does not support detachment. Sharing the same roof and yard space, may be a thing of the past but, short of emigrating, the intrusion isn’t. This is where the infidelity in a marriage, when one or both partners are West Indian, usually begins. However, it is seldom understood as such.

A newly married couple must be allowed to depend on each other. The wife needs to know that it is her cooking that now sustains her husband, and not something out of his mother’s pot. He in turn needs to prove his worth during pregnancy and afterwards. An overzealous mother or sibling should not seek to make his role redundant. Together they must know that it is their roof, albeit a rented one, and not the roof of a protective in-law. And running home is no solution to conflicts.

To be genuinely supportive, the extended family’s role, when its members reach adulthood or enter into marriage, should be to demand that they stand on their own two feet. Breaking away from home is as essential to the adult as learning to walk is to the toddler. I now understand the significance of the verse in Ezra Pound’s “Commission” that reads:

*Go my songs…*

*Go to the adolescent who are smothered in family –*

*Oh, how hideous it is*

*To see three generations of one house gathered together!*

*It is like an old tree with shoots,*

*And with some of the branches rotted and falling.*

The West Indian Father.

There can be few images saintlier than that of a West Indian father and child. It conjures up hope that the inherent good in man will survive against overwhelming odds. There are those who claim that the vision is a rare sight, and others who scathingly dismiss as an illusion. But as always, the greatest condemnation comes from those who prudishly hold themselves aloof. Generally, the West Indian mother who has been through the mill is less critical. Through practical experience, sees her man in a kindlier light. Understanding is the crux of the matter.

First, we must understand and come to terms with a terrible fact: At least 95 percent of all West Indian children are unwanted at the time they are conceived. The lyrics of the popular Trinidadian song tell a lie: “I wanna have a baby with you” is not a sentiment of the West Indian man. Sex, yes; a child, no! The West Indian woman shares his needs and his aversion. Her body, like his, urgently wants the one but not the other. Within a month the baby in her womb has become a hateful thing to them both. The seed that they carelessly planted becomes a barrier between them. Their relationship cools considerably. There is no real love to sustain it, only a fleeting ecstasy which soon gives way to shame, anger and - so often for her - sexual revulsion. Other than a tacit understanding that she is pregnant with his child, they do not talk about it. The tension heightens as the weeks go by. Their main worry is that of revealing the pregnancy and the reaction of others. For that reason, no one must know, or at least not until the secret can be concealed no longer.

But not much escapes the notice of the West Indian extended family, least of all a pregnancy in the confines of a yard space. The father is found out, rather than proclaimed by his own initiative. Any strength that the couple may have found in each other is soon invalidated by domineering parents or siblings. Instead of insisting that the father be accountable, they collectively undermine his responsibilities. Marriage is rarely considered by anyone as a way forward.

Fathering children within a happy marriage is the ideal, but in this region not the reality. If a marriage fails the court can ruthlessly deprive the father of any function other than that of providing money. He can be denied all reasonable contact with the child. His love is not considered a necessity.

In a society where marriage is the exception rather than the rule, the accidental pregnancy that we have so far assumed should not go unchallenged. More often than is realised, fathering a child is intentionally used as a means of securing a woman without the commitment or complication of marriage. This form of bondage uses the child as a means to its end and is vulnerable to the father abandoning, or threatening to abandon, his support if the relationship breaks down.

From such troublesome beginnings, the West Indian father must materialize. He does so, but slowly and grudgingly. In the months before the birth, he does not take the girl out anymore, and even if he offered, she would be reluctant to be seen in public. Her belly is an embarrassment to them both. He might occasionally drive her to the doctor or clinic, providing that it does not interfere with anything he had planned to do with his friends. He would not consider staying by her side for the visit itself. He will give her money to buy things for the baby, but not help her shop for them. At the time she goes into labour he may not be found.

With the birth of the child there emerges the first timid assertion of the man as a father. He visits the hospital. He feels awkward and conspicuous and can think of nothing meaningful to say. There doesn't seem to be much he can do. Her family have attended to her needs. He does not stay long, but before he goes, he gives the mother a small screwed up paper bag that forever redeems him. It contains a present for his child.

In an attempt to pick up life where she left off, the mother returns to work as soon as she can. That is assuming that she is fortunate enough to have a job to go back to. Her family looks after the baby. The father's life continues without interruption. His family may help with minding the child when it gets older. In the meantime, he contributes money toward the child's upbringing. The amounts vary. In true West Indian fashion, the arrangement has no hard and fast rules. They rekindle their feelings for one another, and from each develops a love for the child.

It is from this period that we owe the saint-like image of the West Indian father. In reality, his role as a father leaves a lot to be desired. His love tends to be possessive. The child that began as their child, in conflict becomes her child or his child. His commitment is minimal; his understanding is sometimes shallow; his support spasmodic; his interest in the child’s schooling is often slight. But at the end of the day, the miracle is, not so much that a child is born, but somehow, out of the most unlikely set of circumstances, a father evolves.

Differentiating Between Nude and Lewd.

A century ago, the American artist Robert Henri wrote:

*There is nothing in all the world more beautiful than the nude human body. It is not only among artists, but among all people, that a greater appreciation and respect for the human body should develop. When we respect the nude we will no longer have any shame about it.*

In the Caribbean, carnival is culture and culture, at least here in Dominica, is classified as art. I question that last linkage, but let’s leave it be, for it gives me a slender qualification to say what I have to say on the subject.

As an artist I have spent a lifetime depicting the beauty of the nude, and in particular, the beauty of the Afro-Caribbean female nude. From that perspective, let me try to differentiate between nude and lewd.

In the early 1980’s, I began the paintings and sculptures in my series, “Daughters of the Caribbean Sun”. My mission was to extol the beauty of the Afro-Caribbean woman, unadorned by foreign influences. To achieve my objective, I had to go beyond Marcus Garvey’s plea to “take the kinks out of your mind, not out of your hair”.

The nude figure is less sexually provocative than one that is scantily dressed. After the initial shock of the nude, the eye takes in the beauty of the body as a whole rather than being drawn to the parts tantalisingly hidden in the name of decency. I know that this is something that many people have difficulty getting their head around, but it is a fact. If I wanted my models to look sexy, I’d put them in a bikini and have them pose seductively, hand on hip.

This is where sexual lewdness corrupts an otherwise innocent picture. But differentiating one from the other can be a delicate balancing act. And this applies not only to the artist and model; carnival participants are also vulnerable to misjudgement.

Let me make it clear, I am not advocating that we revert to a state of nudity but that we do not succumb to an overload of missionary zeal. After all, we are supposed to be the Nature Island of the Caribbean and what could be more natural than ourselves? A comment in my visitors’ book from a Carnival Queen contender reads: You have opened my eyes and mind to true beauty.

My subjects are not professional models. They come from all walks of life, from college graduates with a Ph.D. to market vendors. What they have in common is an understanding of what I am trying to portray. Without exception they have all found the experience liberating and uplifting. It is the model’s task to inspire, and they are proud of their contribution to the creative process. Incidentally, age need not destroy beauty. A profound nude by the French sculptor Rodin portrays a woman in her eighties.

Before I begin a painting, or when instructing a life class, I cite the words of advice given by a past master of the figure: “Take the shoes from off thy feet, for the ground you are about to step upon is Holy Ground”. Perhaps we should all heed those words.

They’ve Paved Paradise.

The lyrics of Joni Mitchell’s song from the 1970’s, serve as a fitting lament to the derogation of Dominica’s natural environment for what is perceived as “development”.

*With a pink hotel, a boutique and a swinging hot spot,*

*You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone,*

*They’ve paved paradise and put in a parking lot.*

My latest concern relates to the construction of a four-mile cable car route through the Morne Trois Pitons World Heritage Site.

The derogation of the world’s natural environment is nothing new. A century ago, the pioneering environmentalist, Sir George Stapledon wrote:

*…the first thing to be decided is the priority of the innumerable claims that the modern state makes on its land surface. When a country is vast and the population is small, the question of priority of claims hardly arises: but in small islands the matter is of extreme urgency. If we take a long view of the case there is not an inch of land to spare, and it is an outrage to posterity to misuse a single yard of it.*

Our fundamental challenge is to re-evaluate the past in order to determine if what was originally considered “development” has in fact been in the best long-term interest of Dominicans. In connection with the airport, the Prime Minister has urged all citizens to, “reject the efforts of the enemies of progress”. But not all progress is necessarily beneficial to Dominica in the long term. And that is what those he labelled as “enemies” are concerned about.

Likewise, the Prime Minister has warned critics of the government’s national housing program that adverse criticism is not welcome because his work is guided by God… “I am basically an instrument…you will not be criticizing the Government; you will be criticizing God”. On the other hand, at last week’s press conference he stated that the lack of progress on the National Library was “because nobody wants to discuss that kind of debate”.

I can understand the frustration that the necessary checks and balances can cause. As Winston Churchill claimed:

*Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body; it calls attention to the development of an unhealthy state of things. If it is heeded in time, danger may be averted; if it is suppressed, a fatal distemper may develop.*

In relation to the cable car project, first and foremost on the list of checks and balances should be an Environmental Impact Assessment. To the best of my knowledge, this has not been carried out.

While we laud this “Isle of Beauty” in our National Anthem, future generations may rightly accuse us of despoiling their legacy with insensitive development. I am sure that returning Dominicans want to find some visage of the land they left behind and that tourists are willing to accept the “Nature Island” on its own terms.

I have read the tempting cable car hyperbole:

*It will feature Dominica as a major tourist destination as many people will be excited to come and visit the second-largest boiling lake in the world…A feasibility survey revealed that the completion of the cable car project would result in a three-fold increase in the country’s tourism…The 10-passenger detachable gondola would provide visitors with a fast, reliable and comfortable means of visiting the national park in less than 20 minutes, etc.*

But it was the video that went along with the hyperbole that clenched my views on the inappropriateness of the project.

Begging, Borrowing and Stealing.

West Indians make lousy beggars. They're not cut out for the task; their hearts are not in it; they are ashamed of the whole rotten business. Even the idle street lout's lament of "gimme dollar" is half-hearted and ineffectual. If challenged, he hangs his head in shame and sidles off. Borrowing comes easier, but only if the amount is small and the terms are left vague. West Indians just don't like being tied down to time and contracts. As thieves they will never be a match to the rest of the world. Their conscience won't let them. They try to get around it by taking a bit at a time, or stealing from their own. But even so, they bust their brains trying to justify it.

The fact of the matter is, that begging, borrowing and thieving are contrary to the West Indian's inherent pride and dignity. By nature, West Indians are happy, honest and hard working. But there is a frailty in these valuable attributes. They cannot withstand contact with the outside world without being taken advantage of. Moreover, they are particularly vulnerable when the outside world encroaches on Caribbean soil. Up until recently, a penciled slip, stacked with countless others on a wire in the village shop, was as close as a West Indian got to credit. Now his daily news is broadcast courtesy of foreign banks eager to offer him a loan for a new car. He is persuaded to join the rat-race of the Western World as seen on television.

This is not to say that the West Indian should stick to his donkey. He is as much entitled to a new car as the next man, but preferable on terms he feels comfortable with. No matter how acceptable the Western World tries to make it, going into debt for a status symbol doesn't say much for your identity.

Politicians, for the most part, offer no help. As opportunists, rather than leaders, their focus is mainly on egoistic material gain. With fewer scruples than the average man, they have become the trend-setters of unnecessary begging and borrowing. Thus, they are vulnerable and ripe for exploitation. That is where corruption in the Caribbean has its roots. West Indians endeavouring, as always, to make themselves into something they are not. Deep down they feel uncomfortable and insecure in the role. In retaliation, they become silent, surly and suspicious. That is what it does to them; that is what they swap their virtues for. It’s a poor deal. And wheeling and dealing are not one of their strong points either. For the trinkets of the Western World their governments sell their birthright in the form of passports.

About the Author

Fifty-five years ago, the author gave up a secure job in engineering design and declared himself as an artist on the pavements of France. His roving painting career gathered momentum in the 1970’s when, with his first wife and small daughter, they sailed a 30ft ketch from England to the Caribbean. Thereafter the islands became his adopted home. Like the Renaissance artists, necessity has made him a man of many parts: painter, sculptor, author, publisher, engineer, architect, fashion designer, boat builder, sailor and adventurer. His studios have ranged from a shack alongside an idyllic cove in the Virgin Islands to a cavernous church assembly hall in the North of England. His present studio is located on the lush island of Dominica. In the 1990’s he began publishing a daily diary on the internet that followed his work as a painter and sculptor. Schools and colleges throughout the world accessed the site. His current diary pages are followed by thousands of artists and art students throughout the world.

You can find out more about Roger Burnett’s life and work at: sculpturestudiodominica.blogspot.com