

The Historical Layers of Waterfort Plaza, Punda



road2
plaza

Introduction

Enclosed by Curaçao's largest fortification built out of local corallite stone, Dutch red bricks, and volcanic trass shipped in from St. Eustatius, the Waterfort Plaza urban development area lies at the western shore of Punda and is without a doubt most identified by the current tall Plaza Hotel tower and the long stretch of repeated bombproof barrel vaults, more commonly known as De Boogjes (The Arches). An enclave within the larger context and fabric of Punda, the Waterfort Plaza lies outside of what used to be the old city walls and therefore does not follow the same orthogonal plan that still shapes Willemstad's oldest district. Because of its unique historic location and function, this illustrious area tells a story with many layers of its own.



Figure 1. Aerial Picture of Punda district, APC 2022

Past

The native inhabitants

The human history of the area presently referred to as the Waterfort Plaza, presumably starts around 800 A.D. Archeological findings show that the areas surrounding the St. Anna Bay, Schottegat, and Waaigat were popular settlement locations amongst the native inhabitants of Curaçao, known as the Caquetio Indians. Even though archeological remains have proved to be difficult to find in the historic city center, due to the many excavations that occurred during the colonial period, the Waterfort Plaza area is hypothesized to have been commonly utilized by the Caquetio Indians, as these native communities were known for their activities around the water. The direct access to the ocean made Punda a favorable location for fishing, and its limestone terrain was a breeding ground for many marine animals and plants that were essential components of the natives' dietary consumption.

Based on recent archeological findings in 2015, it was concluded that Punda and Pietermaai were popular locations among Curaçao's first inhabitants and, more specifically, that the terrain surrounding the Waterfort Plaza may hold important physical remains of this early history.

Figure 1 "Selma" – Schilderij van Annemieke Dicke "de oorspronkelijke bewoners van Curaçao" – uit de expositie "Verbeeld Verleden – 50 jaar Nationaal Archief Curaçao" – 2019



Past

From colonial trading fortifications to Dutch military base

The easily accessible natural waters of Schottegat did not only draw the Caquetio Indians to the area, and developed into a Dutch trading settlement only a couple of centuries later. What started as a natural shelter and docking location for the Dutch West Indian Company's (W.I.C.) merchant ships, quickly turned into a secure stronghold and military base, with the building of Fort Amsterdam and the first Waterfort in 1635, where the colonial government's headquarters were situated. Within roughly a century, the second and third Waterfort were built, only to be eventually replaced by the fourth and current Waterfort in 1827-1830. In contrast with the first three Waterforts, which were rather entrenchments built by the W.I.C., the fourth Waterfort was constructed by order of the newly established Kingdom of the Netherlands along intricate military engineering lines by fortress engineers and was designed to withstand modern navy and army attacks. Consisting of 69 casemates of which 52 formed canon cellars, the Waterfort was equipped with 124 pieces of artillery and had just about everything an independently functioning fort needed: a weapon depot, laboratory, bakery, food warehouse, water cisterns, latrines, and prison cells. In addition, the Willem III Kazerne (military base) was built on the inner courtyard of the Waterfort in 1859. The barracks provided accommodation for 178 soldiers, and higher military officials and their families.

The Waterfort, however, never saw any active military action, not even during World War II, when it functioned together with The Riffort as a military center. During this time, a steel cable had been stretched between the two forts to prevent enemy ships and submarines from entering the St. Anna Bay. Since this was one of the busiest harbors in the world, especially during the war when the refinery worked at full capacity, convoys of ships had to be piloted into the harbor within the shortest possible timeframe, as German submarines were closely lurking along the coast.

Figure 2. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE SH 18 PF 158 DIV 5 P 8 D

Figure 3. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S._Geerts_-_Plan_van_een_gedeelte_van_de_Willemstad_en_het_fort_Amsterdam_1754



The Waterfort and the Willem III Kazerne were protected by a large black gate and entering was strictly prohibited. After WWII, The Waterfort maintained its military function for 10 years, after which the area was transferred to a hotel corporation in 1955.

Like most forts, the Waterfort was a secluded area that had its own set of functions and had limited partaking in the city around it. It was only after 1955 when the hotel corporation 'El Curaçao' took over the area, that the entrance gate was demolished and the Waterfort was made accessible to the public. The removal of the entrance gate also made way for the current Plaza Piar, which commemorates one of the most celebrated Curaçaoan born war heroes.

In 1955, the Waterfort's last military commander, handed over the key to the director of the new hotel corporation. In the same year, Prince Bernhard symbolically laid down the first brick of the new hotel: Curaçao InterContinental. The buildings situated on the inner courtyard, including the Willem III Barracks, were demolished, after which the Waterfort was completely removed from all its military functions on January 21st, 1956.

Figure 4. Military Traditions Military Salute for Velas Latino America, APC 2022

Figure 5. Plaza Piar, dutchcaribbean.tv.com/djadumingo-a-konmemora-205-ana-di-morto-di-komandante-manuel-piar-na-plaza-pia

Military Traditions

The Waterfort served a military function since its construction, until 1955. Close to the harbor entrance, a salute battery was stationed on the wall of The Waterfort. Here, the flag would be raised whenever ships would enter or leave the harbor and performed a salute, which was in turn answered by the fort's salute battery. At noon, the so-called time shot was fired. This was also done at midnight on December 31st to herald the New Year. This tradition of saluting ships is still performed on formal occasions.

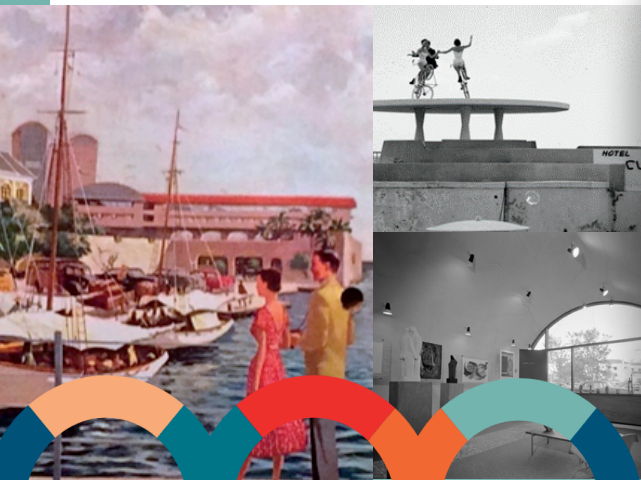


Seaside balconies, nightclubs, galleries, and restaurants

In the second half of the 20th century, the booming post-war hotel industry had found its way to Curaçao. Globally, the tourism industry had already started to develop in the first decades of the 20th century, as prestigious luxury hotels like the Waldorf Astoria in New York, the Adlon Kempinski in Berlin, and La Mamounia in Marrakech were established. The years post WWII were an extension of the 1920s philosophy of leisure and entertainment, in which the fast social, economic and political developments had an enormous impact on the design and business operation of hotels. Departing from the exclusiveness in the early 20th century, hotels in the early 1950s developed into club like accommodations for the happy few. The 1950s are thus remembered as a prosperous time of recovery from the Great Depression and the war years in which a new optimism was born and heroes like Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly were celebrated. Curaçao, which was previously only commercially accessible by steamships and only offered short-stay tourism, was quickly becoming a hot spot for stayover tourism, after commercial air flights were introduced, heralding the start of the modern tourism industry; holiday club destinations made it to the scene, a precursor for today's all-inclusive resorts.

The new InterContinental Hotel was Curaçao's first embodiment of this pivotal era. With a harmonious new design of two three-story building blocks that opened onto the wall of the Waterfort, and 120 rooms, this hotel became the new buzz in Punda. High-end tourists could now promenade along the walls of the Waterfort, cool off in the swimming pool overlooking the harbor entrance, and visit the Cave the Neptune nightclub, which was famous for its extravagant parties and events where both local and international artists performed. As the demand for more accommodations grew, the 14-story tower was built next to the north-south wing of the existing hotel in 1970, adding approximately 140 extra rooms. The uppermost floor had a restaurant and a penthouse suite, where the most exclusive guests could enjoy a panorama view of the Atlantic horizon from their seaside balcony, while restaurant guests enjoyed a bird's-eye view of the harbor and historic city center.

Figure 6-8-. Intercontinental Hotel Curacao & Waterfort arches serving as hospitality functions ,
Digitale Beeldbank, Nationaal Archief



The Arches

The Waterfort arches, more commonly known as "De Boogjes", also adapted to the pivotal changes that occurred in the years following the construction of the hotel. As the fort's military function had come to an end in 1956, the arches no longer served as gun barrel vaults, military barracks, civil prison cells, gun powder magazines, and such, but were designated as shops and restaurants. In some of these arches, one could for example find well known offices (like MCB and the Curaçao Tourism Board), an art gallery (Galerie de Boog), and a shop that sold quality local handmade products (Vereniging van Huisvlijt).

Present & Future

Faded Glory & Sustainable Vision

After moving from one owner to another, the hotel complex now known as the Plaza Hotel, permanently closed its doors in 2017. What was once remembered as one of the most prestigious areas of Curaçao, is now surrendered to the unforgiving forces of time and neglect. Due to a lack of careful maintenance in the past years, the building complex is in a state of despair and irreversible damage. The courtyard and pool are in a dilapidated condition and the now vacant interior is a victim of regular vandalism and theft. The closure of the hotel has also affected the prosperity and conditions of the Waterfort arches, few of which are still used as restaurants, storage and art studios.

What's to come

In 2020 the Algemeen Pensioenfonds van Curaçao (APC) bought the former Plaza Hotel building complex with the goal to revitalize the area and create a much needed positive impact in Punda. This urban development offers a unique opportunity to integrate this historically secluded area with the rest of Punda and Willemstad. Given the various historic layers of the location, the development aims to add a new chapter to its story while paying attention to its past. Present and future needs will be catered with high-quality design and a multifunctional program existing of apartments, hotel, workspaces, shops, restaurants, culture and public spaces. Based on these ambitions, Waterfort Plaza wants to offer a wide range of experiences that will appeal to a diverse group of residents and visitors and that will ensure a sustainable continuation of living, working and leisure in Historic Willemstad.

Figure 10-12. Maquette Punda current analysis & Road 2 Plaza Placemaking trajectory with workshops and interactive activities, APC 2022



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Commissioned by APC

