

# GREEN FINGERS



"Cultural landscapes are a legacy for everyone. These special sites reveal aspects of our country's origins and development as well as our evolving relationships with the natural world. They provide scenic, economic, ecological, social, recreational, and educational opportunities helping communities to better understand themselves.

Neglect and inappropriate development put our irreplaceable landscape legacy increasingly at risk. Too often today's shortsighted decisions threaten the survival and continuity of our shared heritage. It is everyone's responsibility to safeguard our nation's cultural landscapes. The ongoing care and interpretation of these sites improves our quality of life and deepens a sense of place and identity for future generations." - The Cultural Landscape Foundation

When compared to other cultural landscapes across the nation, the small, distant island of Saint Croix is no different. From the pre-Columbian era to the West India Slave Trade to present day the landscape of St. Croix has adapted and evolved into the culturally and historically rich island that it is today. Throughout the next several stages of the design process, my goal will be to enhance the cultural identity of the island that seems to be misrepresented or lost entirely. Through my design of Salt River Bay, I plan to integrate the many different period of St. Croix's history into the planned programs and activities on site. Whether kayaking in the bay like the native Tainos, sailing around Columbus's landing, or guided tours through old slave plantations; a strong connection to St. Croix's heritage will always be present.

# ST. CROIX - Salt River Bay

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*“Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.” – Lucy Lippard*

In order to understand a particular place one must be willing to immerse oneself in the culture, history and everyday life of its inhabitants. On August 24, our class of twelve New Jersey residents traveled to the Caribbean island of St. Croix in order to gain a sense of place. For four days, we experienced everything from local foods to hiking through the rugged landscape to having deep conversations with the locals. Although we were only there for a short time, I feel as though we gained a valuable understanding of both the land and its people. Over the next few months we will be analyzing this information and using it to design an engaging landscape and park program that will hopefully go above and beyond the expectations of our client, the stakeholders and the locals.

# The Place

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St. Croix, at 84 square miles, is the largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands. At the east end, which is also the eastern-most point of the U.S., the terrain is rocky and arid due to the harsh winds that buffet the coastline. The west end is covered by dense vegetation consisting of a small tropical day forest. As we flew over the island, we were able to get our first overall glimpse of this unique landscape. Lining the coastline were long stretches of white sand and rocky beaches protected by miles of dense coral reefs. Looking toward the inland, we were almost eye-level with the endless sprawl of lush green hills. Scattered throughout the hillsides were many large estate-like dream homes that looked out at the picturesque landscape.

As we left the airport, we drove past the Hovensa Oil Refinery. This massive plantation of parking lots, buildings and smoke towers seemed out of place on such a beautiful island. Although it is probably the most influential part of the local economy it makes one think about the pollution and run-off that is ultimately affecting the sensitive ecologies of the already small island. Revitalizing the local tourism economy and developing interest in the island's cultural heritage could ultimately bring local revenue that is better suited to protecting the island.

Driving along the winding roads to our hotel, it was easy to see that circulation around the island is quite an adventure. Driving through the mountains around tight corners make what should be a short journey an adventure. Also, with no effective public transportation offered, circulation around the island is made that much more difficult, as walking and biking are currently risky endeavors.

Our hotel gave us our own backyard view of our site, Salt River Bay. The bay, which is part of the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve, is home to upland watersheds, estuarine and marine environments and the largest mangrove forest on the Virgin Islands. It also is the location of Columbus' second arrival in the New World and the first battle fought between the European and the native Taino Indians. The land itself is of great archeological importance; as ownership of the island shifted several times throughout history, many artifacts and remnants of their cultures are scattered around the bay. Remnants of an old Taino ball court are still in its original location. Revival of such cultural artifacts would be an interesting and desired addition to the current National Park program.





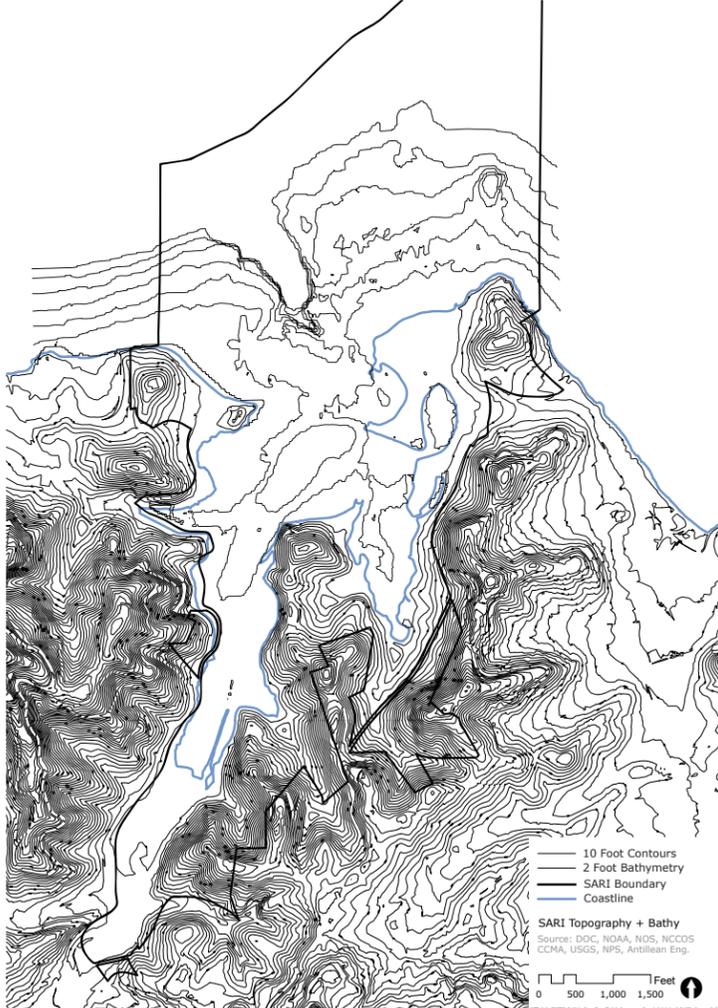
The landscape of St. Croix played a crucial role in the history of the island. We learned that there is very little primary growth that remains. During the times of slavery and even after, the vast majority of the landscape was covered with sugarcane. As a result, the existing vegetation is primarily young and consists of many invasive species. Although it would be quite the task, replanting the site with native vegetation could add both to the historical and cultural landscape, while providing natural benefits to the surrounding ecologies. Using the invasive species in a productive and regenerative process could also help to “heal the site”.



One of the most challenging and exciting aspects of the project is developing a park program that can satisfy the needs of the site, its managers, the locals, and the visitors. As the park is still in its development stage, access to the park is very limited if not completely off limits. The current entrance to the park is through Judith’s Fancy, an expansive Oceanside suburban development that borders the eastern side of the park boundary. A new road has been established to serve as the main entrance to the park once construction has been completed. Again access and transportation are going to be recurring problems throughout the planning and design stages of this park.

Another aspect of the landscape that needs to be considered is the water. The bay is home to an ecosystem of mangroves, estuaries, coral reefs, and a submarine canyon. Although this vital ecosystem needs to be protected at all costs, managed access to the water should be included in the park's program. While in St. Croix, the class took a long kayak tour of the bay. Sitting in the bay looking up at the extreme landscape provides a completely different perspective of the site. I couldn't help but picture myself as a native Taino islander paddling across the bay. I feel that activities such as this would not only appeal to locals and visitors but to stakeholders who would appreciate this cultural and historical connection being reestablished within the park.





# The People

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After arriving in St. Croix one of my first observations was how friendly and open the locals are to visitors and tourists. The Crucians seem to be genuinely personable and happy to welcome newcomers to their home. Another point that was made clear throughout our trip, was how small the island actually is. As we traveled the island, ate at local restaurants and went to meetings it seemed as though everyone knew everyone else. One afternoon, while eating lunch at the “Chicken Shack”, many sat in awe as one person after another would enter the open-air pavilion and quickly be immersed in talks about the weather, politics and sports. Local businesses and restaurants have become an integral part of the everyday life of the locals. Incorporating social gathering areas into the park’s program could bolster local excitement in the area and ultimately produce funding and support.

In dealing with this project, it is interesting to hear and consider the many different opinions people have about the outcome of Salt River Bay. In talking with many of the local influences, we gathered that the island is currently hindered by an identity crisis. As ownership shifted throughout the years, many of the people who we would consider locals were never granted

any say in the outcome of the island, leaving them feeling completely disenfranchised. Their history and culture has never been truly acknowledged and respected. I feel as though, it is our obligation to incorporate all historical aspects of the island, as a means of revealing a fractured historical timeline.

Another interesting observation I made while kayaking with the local high school students, was that many wanted to leave the island. I found it interesting that we as mainlanders see a lush island surrounded by water as an escape, while the local youth sees the encompassing ocean as a preventative barrier. It makes one think about the availability of local opportunities and means of achieving educational and professional goals. I feel that tourism, and outreach programs sponsored through the park could offer the local youth with interesting opportunities for personal advancement.

The local traditions and activities are also of great concern to the people. Many are worried that as the National Park System organizes the program of the park, the traditions that are based in the area will be quickly forgotten. The people of St. Croix house a



deep historical connection with the landscape. Managed events or the availability or permits could allow for public use while maintaining the integrity of the park’s cultural landscape. This should be a guiding factor throughout the planning of the park.

According to their mission, the National Park Service is “to promote and regulate the use of the...national parks...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” With this being said, the National Park Service harbors a passionate concern for both the heritage of the site and the archeological significance found in the surrounding areas. In order to maintain the importance of these areas, visitation and use of the park will have to be granted in a controlled and manageable fashion.

The National Park Service also stated their strong interest in community and education outreach. Class trips, guided tours and archeological exhibits are some of the programs that could be implemented within the local school system. Allowing locals and visitors to interact with and experience



the park's history and culture will develop interest and revenue for the not only the park but the entire island. The goal of the MREC site is to support coral reef exploration, research and conservation, K-12 education and residential learning experiences for college students. One of the major concerns for the future of the site is its susceptibility to the harsh elements. The National Park Service wants to guarantee that the design incorporates sustainable, sturdy materials while thinking about the possibility of flooding and strong winds that rip through the island. Their hope is to make the MREC site a LEED certified building that displays sustainable practice.

“What we save now may be all we save” – Stewart Udall

“We seem to put our highest ideals in our national parks. They're like homes for our finest dreams.” – Paul Schullery.



# The Program

After taking in all that we learned on our site visit to St. Croix, my hope is to design an inviting campus-like atmosphere that is based around the historical and cultural importance of the site. I would also like to use the site's rich history to restore the lost identity of the local Crucian people. Using the structure of the many sugar mills as inspiration, I would like to create a memorial that could be seen as a beacon for the remembrance of the past and hope for the future. Recreational activities on the site, such as hikes along old slave trails, kayaking and snorkeling in the bay and guided tours, would not only add to the educational outreach programs but also develop local interest in the site. Reestablishing the Taino ball court and planting areas of native agriculture could help to restore the cultural landscape. All of these programs will ultimately boost the local tourism economy.

The MREC site will also employ a sustainable design approach that could be used to not only educate the local people but also the visiting students and professionals. Using such practices as perma-culture, living terraces and regenerative designs I hope to develop a series of outdoor spaces that would connect the building into the landscape. The outdoor spaces would also limit the building footprint, allowing for a more sensitive design approach.



