

Mario Bellini to revive Caribbean island through architecture and design

ARCHITECTURE / 31 OCT 2018 / BY ROSA BERTOLI

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Mario Bellini's proposed plan for the revival of an old castle on Virgin Gorda, into a public space for gathering

Mario Bellini's first experience of the Caribbean island of Virgin Gorda (a Spanish name meaning 'fat virgin') came through an invitation from entrepreneur brothers Guillermo and Patrick Houwer. The island had just suffered the hit of Hurricane Irma, and the pair asked the Italian architect to survey the devastation and flesh out their plan for an ambitious regeneration project.

Guillermo and Patrick's father had bought Biras Creek, a resort on the island, in 1996, and opened it to the public two years later. The brothers visited frequently growing up, and Biras became a second home for them. Following the destruction of the island, they both saw the opportunity for a new approach to the land, creating a new standard of development in sync with the natural surroundings.

For this reason, they 'decided to reach out to Bellini Architects, who not only understand and share our vision on sustainable and responsible building, but have for the past 50 years been one of the greatest innovators of our time in terms of design.' The project will be established amidst restoration work by the locals, who are working hard to bring their island back to life because, as the architect notes, 'life is more valuable than fear.'

'This is one of the last remaining undeveloped and unspoiled Caribbean destinations,' says Bellini, who is familiar with some nearby islands but until recently never visited Virgin Gorda. His first step was an in-depth exploration of the island, to understand what it had been before the hurricane. Guided by the brothers, Bellini studied the land on foot, by boat and using drones, imagining how they could work on the island and what kind of structures they could build.



Aerial view of the plans for the island of Virgin Gorda

The project will include several hospitality structures across the island, including a complex with 103 rooms, a marina and a bay with a further 56 rooms. There will be several restaurants and bars, a leisure and sports centre, swimming pools and a spa, as well as 10 luxury villas. The marina will be the first structure built as part of the new development, 'to give life back to the island,' explains Bellini. The other elements of the project will be added slowly over a period of a few years.

One of the main challenges of the job, notes the architect, was to maintain the character of the island: 'There is a certain Robinson Crusoe effect for those who come to this island,' he says, 'people who come to these places don't expect a perfectly equipped structure, so we tried to incorporate essential services while keeping this magic intact.'

During his explorations, Bellini also found an ancient architectural structure which locals called 'the castle'; an old fort of which only the foundation remained. 'We decided to recover it,' says Bellini, 'we thought of it as something noble to save.' The castle will become a public structure featuring a staircase, inviting visitors and locals alike to climb up and discover the incredible panorama; the architect's ultimate tribute to Virgin Gorda's incredible, wild beauty. ★



The view of the new design for the castle from the sea