Le 8 Mai 1902, à 7h52, Saint-Pierre, l’ancienne capitale économique et culturelle de l’île de la Martinique, n’est plus, ravagée par l’éruption péléenne de sa Montagne. En quelques secondes, l’une des plus importantes villes de la Caraïbes est rayée. Plus d’un siècle plus tard, la vie continue, laissant les ruines en témoin d’un passé qu’on ne veut surtout pas oublier. Mais cette ancienne capitale, vidée de ses 30 000 habitants à la veille de l’éruption, peine encore aujourd’hui à retrouver son dynamisme et sa gloire d’antan.

Pourtant, niché au creux d’une ravine, dans les hauteurs de la ville, le Domaine DIKI propose une architecture qui mêle histoire, culture et modernité dans un but de créer un lieu plein de sensibilité. Avec ses grands débords de toitures aux couleurs des habitations tropicales, la réhabilitation des ruines de cette ancienne habitation résonne de nouveau comme une touche d’espoir et de renaissance.

Malgré la menace du risque qui plane, le projet trouve sa place et s’épanouit au côté de la nature qui l’entoure nous rappelant peut-être que l’architecture c’est d’abord accepter de ne pas tout maîtriser et que le risque est une raison suffisante pour que cela vaille la peine d’exister même un instant.

On 8 May 1902, at 7:52 a.m., Saint-Pierre, the former economic and cultural capital of the island of Martinique, was no more, ravaged by the Pelean eruption of its Montagne. In a matter of seconds, one of the Caribbean’s most important cities was wiped out. More than a century later, life goes on, leaving the ruins as a reminder of a past not to be forgotten. But this former capital, emptied of its 30,000 inhabitants on the eve of the eruption, is still struggling to regain its former dynamism and glory.

And yet, nestled in a gully high above the city, Domaine DIKI’s architecture blends history, culture and modernity to create a sensitive setting. With its large overhanging roofs in the colours of tropical dwellings, the rehabilitation of the ruins of this former dwelling once again resonates as a touch of hope and rebirth.

Despite the looming threat of risk, the project finds its place and flourishes alongside the surrounding nature, reminding us perhaps that architecture is first and foremost about accepting that not everything can be mastered, and that risk is reason enough to make it worthwhile to exist even for a moment.
INTRODUCTION

I’ve been wondering how best to tell the story of Saint-Pierre. I don’t pretend to be able to tell the story that historians and enthusiasts know, nor the one vaguely heard by a lot of curious Martiniquais.

This story, like a travel diary, is the one I learned and lived on my island:

Although the commune’s location gives it the air of a town where you just pass through without necessarily stopping, I often got into the habit of staying there in my mind’s eye as I watched it pass by through the back window of the family car.

I remember always asking to pass along the path that runs along the island’s coastline to see Saint-Pierre, its ruins around every corner, its theatre, its life...

How does the architecture of the town of Saint-Pierre in Martinique, emerging from the remains of the terrible volcanic eruption of 1902, embody and reveal the dynamic relationship between past, present and future, while balancing the imperatives of rapid reconstruction and future, while balancing the relationship between past, present and future, while balancing the imperatives of rapid reconstruction and future, while balancing the relationship between past, present and future, while balancing the imperatives of rapid reconstruction and future, while balancing the relationship between past, present and future, while balancing the imperatives of rapid reconstruction and future.

Between vulnerability and resilience, we are invited to question the behaviour of a territory subject to natural hazards, a highly topical issue given climate disruption. It also highlights the importance of understanding how architecture can serve as a living testimony to the way a community interacts with time, culture and nature.

1. THE NOTION OF TEMPORALITY

First of all, I think it’s important to define Temporality according to LaRoussie’s French dictionary.

**Temporalité / feminine noun:** Character of something that takes place in time.

In other words, we’re talking here about something that is situated in time and therefore has a limited, ephemeral duration.

It’s a notion that can vary according to the cultures, civilizations and lifestyles that take it more or less into consideration - as in the case of certain grammars of isolated languages, such as Vietnamese, which ignore the conjugation of verbs in the future or past tense.

If I take the example of Western culture, which is more familiar to me, time is considered to be one of nature’s “non-renewable” resources. Here, temporality rhymes with sustainability, and that’s what we’re going to look at below.

But what about the notion of temporality in architecture?

“The notion of ‘transmission’ is included in that of ‘heritage’. According to a generally accepted definition, heritage is that which is inherited from the past and passed on to future generations. [...] In English, ‘heritage culture’ translates as ‘inheritance’ according to Michel Melot in ‘L’échelle de l’architecture et du patrimoine’.

Architecture has always left a visible trace on the earth’s surface. It’s a responsibility that every builder and master builder shoulders. In designing buildings, the architect bears a heavy responsibility that goes far beyond the mere creation of functional structures. They must take into account the long-term visual and ecological impact of their creations.

The architect plays an essential role in creating buildings that contribute to a sustainable environment for future generations. His/her responsibility goes beyond simple construction and is based on a deep understanding of the impact of his/her choices on society and the planet.

2. MARTINIQUE: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Before I begin, I’d like to give a brief introduction to my island,

This lively district was also a major cultural centre in Saint-Pierre and the seat of the city’s political life.

Two longitudinal streets cross the town from one end to the other. Today, these same streets are known as “la Rue Bouillié” (on the seafront) and “la Rue Victor Hugo” - originally named “La Grande Rue” or “Rue Royale”, the high street further inland. It was a town brimming with vitality and a good place to live, with abundant water supplied by canals that fed fountains and gutters at the foot of houses and courtyards.

It had a tramway that took passengers from the south of the city to the Bourse - at that time the center of Saint-Pierre’s commercial and port activities, and also allowed goods to be loaded and unloaded on the commercial streets. It was also the world’s first rum port, hosting the Saint-James Distillery, which introduced Martinique’s agricultural rum to the international market in the 1810s.

Last but not least, it’s a place known for its beautiful walks along the banks of the Roselane - an emblematic river that rises on the southern slopes of Mount Pelée, where it flows for two kilometres before bending its course towards the Caribbean Sea, the Savane du Plantes, never rebuilt...

Extract from a report written by the vicar general the day after the disaster, administrator of the diocese in the bishop’s absence, sent to Monseigneur de Cormont, former bishop of Saint-Pierre, who was in Paris.

Saint-Pierre was stripped of its title as the colony’s capital and has never regained this predominant status. Today, it is the seat of a sub-prefecture and has a division of the Martinique Chamber of Commerce. For years, the town lay in ruins. Saint-Pierre lost its role as economic capital of the colony to Fort-de-France (Fig. 2).

The law of February 15, 1910 even struck it off the map of French communes. Its management was entrusted to the neighbouring
town of Le Carbet. The 1910 law authorized the receiving commune to sell the assets of the suppressed commune, and to keep the profits from its liquidation. As a result, Saint-Pierre lost a large part of its archaeological heritage. It wasn’t until 1923 that Saint-Pierre rose from the ashes. The town was gradually rebuilt, sometimes in the same way as before - the identically rebuilt Chamber of Commerce is now one of the island’s finest architectural achievements, as is the former Cathedral of Mouillage, sometimes in a more modern way - housing or private property. The population gradually returned to the town, but never reached the 30,000 souls who lived there on the eve of the 1902 eruption. The town’s population has grown from 3,000 in 1923 to 4,122 today.

2.3. The hunt for ruins

During this immersion of just over ten days, I get to know the city, meet people and immerse myself in life there. I soon left my car parked at Place Bertrand every morning, not far from the covered market and its metal architecture. My creative process gradually began to take shape. For the first two days, I would wander around in a haphazard, random fashion, without a plan or support, delighted to be surprised by the ruins scattered around every corner. Stopping, drawing, photographing, questioning passers-by. Then I decided to ask for a map of the city, so I can follow an organized route and make sure I don’t miss anything. I subsequently embarked on what I decided to call a “ruin hunt”, which enabled me to realize the potential of walking around the city, a veritable open-air museum with tourism that is unfortunately under-exploited and unregulated.

There are four different types of ruins at St-Pierre (Figs. 3 and 4):

- The decorative ruins stand out for their monumental appearance. They are regularly maintained - even summarily - to keep them in good condition and create an attraction.
- The ruin-gardens are home to the island’s northern vegetation. You can take a stroll or simply enjoy the ambiance of the town and the wider landscape. Left as they were on the day of the disaster.
- The sinister ruins, often large sections of entire house walls that have never been altered to enhance the ambience of the town and the wider landscape...
- The ruin-support structures, as their name suggests, are used to support a new construction. Depending on the state of the remains, they can be rebuilt identically or used to enclose a new building.

Also, the “Mont-au-Ciel” street, a true monument that stands the test of time, like the “Pont Roche” spanning the Roxelane River, perpendicular to the Levassor street with its 84 steps that linked the lively neighbouring districts with the heights of the city’s north. Its wide, angled stone gutters continue to evacuate sewage and tropical rainwater as they once did.

2.4. Living with risk

The Architectural and historical wealth of Saint-Pierre bears witness to the rebuilding of life after the 1902 disaster. But the ruins are also a reminder of the risk that hangs over Saint-Pierre and the north of the island.

The life that has been recreated from the ashes is seen as a sign of resilience and a determination not to forget what happened.

As Martiniquans, we’ve always lived with risk. The risk of natural disasters like eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, and the risk of climatic disasters like hurricanes, cyclones, tropical storms, rising waters.

Saint-Pierre is a response to the fact that nature decides at all times, and that we have a duty to deal with it. Despite the fact that a new awakening of Montagne Péele is hovering over the Pierrotins and the north of the island, isn’t it precisely an opportunity to question ourselves, to take a step back from our relationship with nature, with the passage of time, with our way of building, with life? How can we listen to all these elements? How can we respect them and make them merge within the architecture during its lifetime? I realize that the notion of time is omnipresent in this study, and that it would be a good idea to keep it in mind in order to build modestly and frugally.

There’s something inspiring about the Pierrotins’ mentality. Far from the banal “misfortune only happens to others”, it’s an awareness of having chosen to live in spite of the risk, following in the footsteps of those who weren’t so lucky.

Today, more than ever, Pierrotins believe that life takes precedence over the grim possibility of another eruption, and that Saint-Pierre deserves more than anything to regain its former glory. And if the mountain rumbles, they’ll have no trouble leaving until they can do it all over again.

3. A TEMPORAL GATEWAY: THE DOMAIN DIKI

Through my various encounters with Saint-Pierre, I’ve come to appreciate the richness and diversity of its ruins. At times, they bear witness to places of life, religious or cultural, such as the “Théâtre du Petit Paris”, or simply to perspectives framed between land and sea that stand out insolently and tenaciously. With this red thread running naturally through the points of interest generated by the remains and their enhancement, I see the possibility of an initial response, leading us step by step to the Domaine project, a few metres higher up.

I wanted to take things a step further and condense the information brought back from the town of Saint-Pierre into an architectural project that would, in my view, be a possible response to the problem of temporality.

This is why the choice of site naturally fell on the ruins of the former Saint James distillery, buried under the ashes after the eruption: Domaine Diki, where the remains of this "rum factory", like a jewel case, seem to accompany, even drive, any transition (Fig. 5).

3.1. The site and existing buildings

First of all, why Diki? Diki comes from the Amerindian language. It’s a relative name in the language of the Arawaks, so-called Amerindians, meaning “footprints”: I chose this word to honour memory and the past, and to establish the cultural and historical importance of my project.

Nine years after being bought out in 1996 to become a sawmill, the establishment closed its doors for good. Since the site’s closure the atmosphere is bleak, the access road to the site is no longer as well-maintained despite the few surrounding dwellings.
It's a very natural, plant-filled site set in a basin created by the slopes of a morne. It has a regular slope that runs all the way down to the Saint-James river. Its location ensures a clean microclimate at all times, with natural ventilation predominantly from the east, reinforced by its orientation within the vat.

The Saint-James distillery was built in 1801 on the site of an old slave house. The factory, with the upper and lower parts of the Port district, is 1,800m² of buildings that could be rehabilitated. Some of the gables are visually dominating and of little aesthetic interest - for example, ashlars roughly secured by concrete, or in a poor state of conservation - but there was also much that was positive and poetic about the former Saint-James dwelling. Most of the original materials have survived the test of time, such as the red brick of the factory ovens and the dressed stone of the majority of the buildings, which have remained in good condition. In addition, some of the façades are very open-ended, allowing the visitor's imagination to hint at past uses. As a result, certain choices could be made to establish an architectural and climatic strategy, such as providing very high ceilings in the second warehouse and promoting natural through-ventilation in the first by removing its gable (Fig. 7).

3.3. The project

After days of wandering around the town of Saint-Pierre, meeting the locals, visiting the sites and various ruins, and spending long periods of time exploring the site, I decided to create a place with a program capable of combining a few notes of Saint-Pierre’s past, the existing and a mixed program to bring back life and activities. This place is Domaine Diki. It consists of four poles:

- Crafts
- Education and culture
- Health and well-being
- Catering & Accommodation

This project has a commemorative and cultural function, and in order to establish a certain identity, I have drawn inspiration from emblematic landmarks such as:

- The main axes of Saint-Pierre to frame strolling on the site in the image of that in the city and connected by more intimate transversal lanes.
- “Le Jardin des Plantes”, the Caribbean islands’ first botanical garden, a mythical place for a certain social class to meet and stroll among luscious tropical plants. The Saint-James river connects the Domaine Diki with the waterfall of “Le jardin des plantes”, which is still in ruins today.
- The “Mont-au-ciel” Street, perpendicularly to Levassor Street, with its steps connecting the upper and lower parts of the Port district.

Based on all this information and analysis, the architectural approach is as follows:

- **Frame the site** to create a new building to frame the plan and materialize an interior commercial Street as Saint-Pierre’s main seaside thoroughfare.
- **Open the box** to flirt with the outside-in boundary by creating porosity, views and perspectives. From a highly enclosed professional space, with high walls and small windows, we move towards an architecture that opens up to the wider landscape and leaves plenty of room for vegetation.
3.4. The landscape project

As far as the landscaping is concerned, I chose to keep the site as natural and planted as possible. The main paths are laid out on gridded slabs, allowing the site to be raised off the ground, allowing vegetation to grow and water to infiltrate into the natural soil. I was able to observe that water flows naturally from the higher slopes down to the river, a phenomenon accentuated by the initial materiality of the site, which is half-paved and half-concreted on the axis between the villa and the former sawmill.

In order to remove the few areas of stagnant water, I chose to create planted valleys to accompany the two main paths, allowing the water to gradually infiltrate the soil without clogging it.

These valleys and water paths are visually appreciable thanks to the grids in the slabs, which form walkways above them so as not to impede drainage. By raising the pathways with open-work walkways, you can admire the run-off from above and let it follow its course to the various gardens or the river that surrounds the site.

The rest of the ground and the access path are paved with interlocking paving to allow vegetation to pass through, and with stabilized soil for more delicate junctions (Fig. 11).

3.5. Materiality

As the Diki domain is intended to be “light/modular/dismantlable”, the choice of materials allows for rapid action in the event of a need - volcanic eruption, for example - to dismantle the whole, while at the same time being culturally and contextually anchored.

- The dated Stone, anchoring point for the lightweight structure.
- Douglas-fir Wood associated with a Japanese burnt-wood technique to commemorate the 1902 disaster.
- CLT Wood, quick to assemble, it allows the “box within a box” principle to be established, with its smooth materiality contrasting with the project’s existing and new textures.
- Corrugated iron, recycled and/or new, is the main roofing material in the West Indies. Its red color allows the possibility to create, from certain angles, a trompe l’oeil aimed at recreating the red clay tile roofing that existed before the 1902 disaster.
- Concrete for anchoring, foundation, consolidation of existing structure.
- Vegetation, which at times becomes new ground, new facades depending on the point of view.

To be an architect is, in a way, to know how to accept, with humility, the idea that it’s not always possible to master everything.

Domaine Diki is a resilient architecture that raises awareness of this acceptance of risk, while at the same time proposing a way of coping with it.

In no way does this project wish to thwart nature, but rather to enhance it, to create the necessary conditions to accompany it rather than channel it. And just because a place is said to be at risk doesn’t mean it doesn’t deserve to be considered. Don’t we have the right to have places that are dear to us and in which we’d like to blossom with full knowledge of the facts?

The architecture of Domaine Diki aims to address and connect history with the existing through a site deliberately left to nature to magnify the whole.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I’d like to return to the notion of risk, clearly evoked at the start of this presentation with the 1902 disaster that devastated the town of Saint-Pierre.

In Western models, architecture tends to oppose nature by protecting itself from it, rather than dealing with it. Looking back, I realize that I have lived most of my life in areas that are subject to all kinds of risks.

If I take the example of my native island, Martinique, there are seismic, cyclonic, volcanic, climatic and other risks. It’s an island that is “used to” unpleasant weather, that has always lived with this sword of Damocles “hovering” over it. Yet when I walk around Saint-Pierre, I’m serene, at ease and amazed at every moment.

If you ask a Pierrotin what he thinks of Montagne Pelée, he’ll tell you that this “Grande Dame” is beautiful, and that he loves waking up and seeing it through his window in the early hours of the morning.

Isn’t this, in the end, an opportunity to raise awareness of a new approach, an architectural vision totally in tune with the natural context, taking risk and therefore temporality into account?

REFERENCES


