



The Gingerbread Reclamation

Despite falling into a state of neglect and disrepair over the past century, Port-au-Prince's beautiful, ornate 'gingerbread' houses were unlikely survivors of last year's earthquake. As the Haitian capital recovers, these once-grand houses are setting a foundation for its cultural and economic restoration

BY MARISA MAZRIA KATZ | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SASHA BEZUBOV



Above: The most famous of Port-au-Prince's so-called gingerbreads, the Hotel Oloffson, with its stunning ornate latticework, will be a focal point of a planned cultural heritage district in the Pacot neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of these uniquely designed homes. **Opposite:** An aerial view of a Port-au-Prince neighborhood devastated by last year's 7.0 earthquake.



The renovations to this neglected 1910 gingerbread, built by Georges Baussan, the architect of Haiti's presidential palace, were put on hold after the earthquake.

IN THE STEEL-BLUE DUSK OF HAITI'S 2010 EARTHQUAKE, 93-YEAR-old Vivian Gauthier was on her toiled veranda surrounded by dance students. At first, the teacher mistook the tremors for the echoes of her drummer's fingers tapping taut lambskin in the rhythm of a traditional Haitian melody. It wasn't until her students began running toward the throngs gathering in the streets that Gauthier understood they weren't sonic beats. Outside the former dancer's wrought-iron gate, high-rises and houses transformed into waterfalls of concrete, while Gauthier's corniced, two-story wooden home swayed and flexed throughout the earth-splitting seismic shifts. And when it was all over, about 30 seconds later, the Port-au-Prince native found herself staring out at piles of rubble from a 125-year-old house that remained almost perfectly intact.

Gauthier owns one of roughly 200 "gingerbread" homes situated in a cluster of several neighborhoods right outside downtown Port-au-Prince. Nicknamed after the florid latticework snaking around the roof's eaves, porches, windows and doors, the precise origins of these turn-of-the-century, high-ceilinged timber structures remain ambiguous. With their sweeping porches and turret roofs, the homes stylistically borrow from Victorian architectural techniques prevalent in the American South. Yet a handful of the most prominent homes here were the creative offspring of several Paris-educated Haitian architects who, upon their return around the late 19th century to Port-au-Prince, set about erecting gingerbreads that combined skills gleaned abroad with a deep understanding of the Caribbean climate: High ceilings

and turret roofs direct hot air above the inhabitable space, windows on all sides create a cool cross-breeze even during seasonal stretches of blistering heat, and the frame's tractability weathers powerful storms. The result is a set of buildings that resisted the plagues constantly afflicting Haiti. In other words, gingerbreads were sustainable long before the word became fashionable.

It wasn't until the January 2010 earthquake struck—and perhaps fewer than 5 percent of the gingerbreads partially or totally collapsed, compared with roughly 40 percent for buildings in the rest of the city—that their existence became so vital. "In an environment like this, nothing sticks around for 100 years by accident," says Conor Bohan, a Rhode Island native and founder of the Haitian Education and Leadership Program. In March 2009, months before the magnitude-7.0 earthquake ripped through Port-au-Prince, Bohan, who has lived on and off in the capital for more than a decade, teamed up with the Association of Haitian Architects & Urbanists to co-nominate the gingerbread houses for the World Monuments Fund's 2010 "Watch" list. The gingerbreads, he explains, already seemed to be on their last legs. The last one had been built in 1910, before a Port-au-Prince mayor issued an edict banning the construction of wooden houses because fires repeatedly swept through and destroyed whole sections of the capital. Over time the artisanal skill set required to construct the homes dwindled. This in combination with "the country's massive brain drain and no local lumber industry from years of deforestation meant a recipe for maintenance disaster," says Bohan, sitting on the trellised, milk-white veranda of Port-au-Prince's most famous gingerbread, the Hotel Oloffson. Like many of its nearby counterparts, the

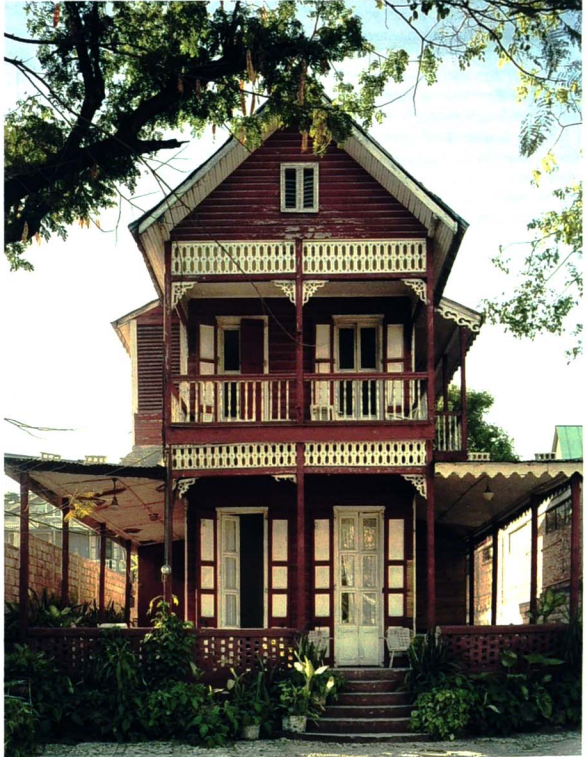
hotel—an inspiration for Graham Greene’s “The Comedians”—suffered only superficial damage during the January tremors.

Bohan’s determination, and his impeccable timing, managed to land the homes on the WMF list a few months before the earthquake. “Political instability and economic strife had precluded substantive preservation efforts in Haiti in recent decades,” says Norma Barbacci, WMF director of programs for Latin America, Spain and Portugal. “Support was needed for the revitalization of these important buildings and communities, and putting it on the list was a viable way to preserve and promote the site.” The move coincided with the ouster of Michèle Pierre-Louis—who counts among her supporters former President Bill Clinton—as Haiti’s prime minister in October 2009. During her fleeting, just-over-a-year-long tenure she encouraged moving the nation away from its reliance on international donors (roughly 60 percent of Haiti’s budget comes from abroad) and boosting investor confidence, with the eventual hope that these measures would stimulate a wave of local job creation. “I was shocked to see the level of dependency, so I advocated for a change to the paradigm,” Pierre-Louis says today. “Haiti will never develop with humanitarian and foreign aid. It needs investment that brings revenue to the state so it can be less dependent.”

Her plans to shift course toward self-sufficiency were cut short due to accusations by then-President René Prével that she mispent aid money that poured into the country after four devastating hurricanes in 2008. Despite praise from the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti for her management of the disasters, Pierre-Louis was dismissed in a landslide Senate vote. “This is a country of the ephemeral,” she explains. “It is a big challenge.”

Even before assuming the ministerial role, the 63-year-old economist made sure that if she were to abdicate she would return as president of the Knowledge and Freedom Foundation (FOKAL), a national foundation in George Soros’s Open Society Institute network that Pierre-Louis co-founded in 1995 and now heads with fellow Haitian Lorraine Mangonès. The Port-au-Prince-based organization aims to promote culture and democracy for the country’s severely marginalized. Not long after her dismissal, Pierre-Louis was back in her spartan corner office at FOKAL. After receiving acceptance to the WMF Watch list, Bohan approached both her and Mangonès to take the reins of the gingerbread revival. “FOKAL is one of the rare institutions that understands the importance of preserving and promoting Haiti’s unique and valuable history and culture, for the benefit of Haitians and non-Haitians alike,” says Bohan.

THE FOKAL COMPOUND, LOCATED IN THE HEART OF THE PACOT NEIGHBORHOOD, IS AN oasis of efficiency in an area pockmarked with sinkholes and glaciers of earthquake debris. Every so often the hum of clicking keyboards and ringing BlackBerrys mixes with the throbbing baritone of men stumping for political candidates on the dirt road below. Separating Pierre-Louis’s and Mangonès’s offices is a stretch of desks filled with young people, mostly in their late 20s and 30s, working to expand the scope of libraries in Haiti, create parks in the centers of slums and monitor media corruption. On the floors below are a library, cybercafe, auditorium, exhibit hall, staff cafe and kitchen, which serves up traditional Haitian dishes like Creole chicken and rice five times a week to the entire FOKAL staff. Behind the parking lot—filled during the day



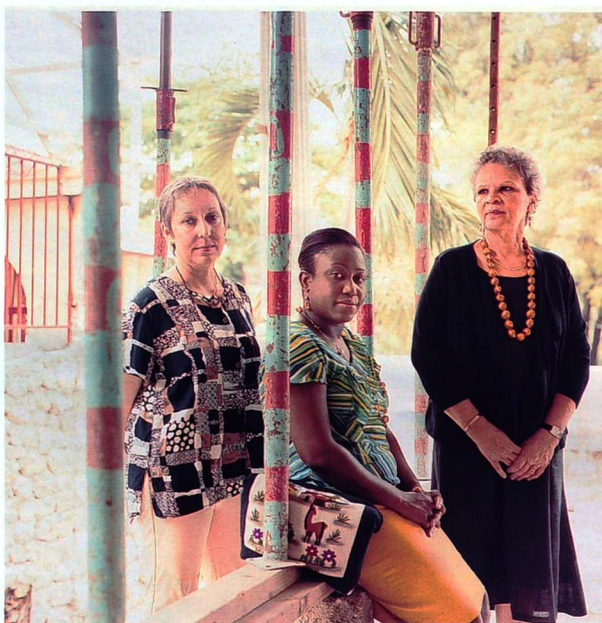
Vivian Gauthier in the salon of her home, which survived the earthquake intact while concrete structures crumbled around her; one of the few remaining family-inhabited gingerbreads, in the Bois Verna neighborhood.

with drivers and bodyguards who accompany the staff around town—is a lush garden haloed with bougainvillea.

Initially, FOKAL signed up as co-sponsors to Bohan's proposition, but once the earthquake hit, the issue became too pressing to watch from the sidelines. "The quake gave us the impetus to jump-start the whole initiative," says Mangonès, FOKAL's executive director. "In spite of their neglect, the gingerbreads stood up." Nowhere is Mangonès's point underscored more than directly in front of the coral-and-white FOKAL headquarters, where a now-deflated concrete home—or "kay beton" in Creole—lies next to a rusted but unscathed gingerbread cottage.

"There was this sense of amazement that this still exists in the country," says Pierre-Louis, looking at an aerial photograph of pre-earthquake Port-au-Prince that hangs on her office wall. "This city was, after all, beautiful." She points to images of the neoclassical presidential palace and Holy Trinity Cathedral—both of which were destroyed. "For me the gingerbreads are an issue of identity, Haitian pride and history."

With that in mind, Mangonès and Pierre-Louis envisioned transforming the almost one-square-mile area directly surrounding their office—which has one of the highest concentrations of gingerbreads, including the Hotel Oloffson—into a cultural heritage district. "We want this to become a tourist center in Port-au-Prince just like in Colombia, where you can pay \$5 to see old hacienda landmarks of the country," Pierre-Louis says. The duo sees culture as the economic mortar that can strengthen a community stuck in a holding pattern of foreign-aid dependence. Under their rehabilitation plan, salvageable gingerbreads will become restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, boutiques and galleries—all owned and operated by Haitians. "If we work hard, and if at the same time we are lucky, we should succeed in completing some convincing features within the next five years," Mangonès says. "This in turn should give impetus to the general movement and attract investors and actors."



From left: FOKAL executive director Lorraine Mangonès, with Gingerbread Renovation Project chief Farah Hypolite and Haiti's former prime minister and FOKAL co-founder and president, Michèle Pierre-Louis.

BEYOND HERITAGE PRESERVATION, THE GINGERBREAD STYLE ENCAPSULATES design techniques that Olsen Jean Julien, former minister of culture and now project manager for the Smithsonian Institution-backed Haiti Cultural Recovery Project, sees as key to the country's reconstruction efforts. "The gingerbreads are a strong witness of our history of the 20th century," Julien says. "Their architecture shows us that the people who built them had the memory of hurricanes and the first earthquake in 1770. They respected seismic codes even before they had been written."

In order to execute a project of this size, Julien explains, roughly \$5 million to \$10 million are needed. And although he has confidence in FOKAL's extensive capabilities, he says, "it is not something they can do on their own." Initial roadblocks are not even fiscal. Nothing in Haitian law stipulates that private property can be considered national heritage. Until that law is changed, anyone can sell or tear down their gingerbread without fear of municipal repercussions. And in a city suffering from a population explosion, these properties with their large yards ("lakou" in Creole) are in demand not for their signature style, but for their sizable plots.

On the sprawling property of a two-story gingerbread house owned by Patrice,

who asked to be referred to by his first name only, one could imagine salivating developers erecting several concrete homes. So far he has warded off those with demolition plans, but Patrice, a former bank officer, is out of work. Worse still, his prospects for finding a job are slim. Holding on to the valuable real estate (according to Mangonès, revealing monetary figures to the public can potentially lead to kidnappings in Haiti), may not be possible for much longer.

Roughly 10 homes out of the 200 counted after the earthquake have been demolished. And while so far none of these have been replaced with newer structures, Pierre-Louis believes, "the clock is ticking." This is why FOKAL wants the government to declare the area a historical zone now. Such a decree, Pierre-Louis explains, would prevent present and future owners from changing or demolishing the character of the gingerbread homes.

Yet for Patrice, heritage status could be "more of a bad thing than good." His fears, he said, come from the government's still-precarious state. "You may hear one day that the house belongs to the state and you have no control over it," Patrice says. "After the earthquake, the whole downtown area was declared state property without notice. As a result, a friend selling his property could no longer do it. Now, he has to wait for the government to compensate him. Believe me, that can take years. You never know when you're going to be taken for a ride in this country."

No declarations can be made without the help of the government, or more specifically its National Institute for Historic Preservation (ISPAN). A visit to the ISPAN headquarters, whose interiors still resemble a crushed porcelain teacup one year after the earthquake, helps explain why securing the area's status has been such a challenge. Only a few of the 22 employees and eight contractors at the Port-au-Prince headquarters ever come to these offices, which for now consist of a couple of temporary plywood shacks next to the damaged main building.

Most staff members are around the country on sites or abroad.

"There is too much work and not enough money," says Monique Rocourt-Martinez, consultant to the ISPAN director whose duties include fund-raising for their Haitian heritage projects. After the earthquake, she explains, "the situation went from bad to just about terrible." The Ministry of Culture has less than 1 percent of the overall 2010 budget of \$1.798 billion, which is split between ISPAN and 11 other autonomous organizations. And until the president enacts a law enabling private property to become national heritage, ISPAN can only advise owners to preserve. If steps aren't taken to protect the houses, Rocourt-Martinez fears they could soon disappear. "If they are not saved, a whole generation which has known nothing but dirty streets, poverty and insecurity will have forever lost a chance at seeing those riches, which are part of their identity," she adds.

Enacting a law of this nature is unlikely, especially now, as the country is undergoing a fresh round of leadership changes. Furthermore, ISPAN and FOKAL need to conduct a full-scale survey of the gingerbreads, which includes identifying owners and analyzing the houses' current structural conditions. Until then, submitting a proposal to Parliament to transform the area's status is on hold.



Clockwise from top: Another view of Gauthier's salon, a rundown gingerbread now part of a secondary school, though its classrooms are no longer in use; vendors fill the roads near the Iron Market, in Centre Ville, Port-au-Prince's commercial district.

MAKING THE AREA A CULTURAL HUB IS A DAUNTING UNDERTAKING, PARTICULARLY when it's still badly bruised. Many collapsed buildings have lain untouched since the quake and may, as Mangonés suggests, encase human remains. Come afternoon, smoldering trash in impromptu landfills sends curls of smoke into the air. At the entrance of hotels, uniformed security guards stand with shotguns. It isn't until an early-evening drive with Mangonés that the neighborhood's potential as a tourist destination is revealed. The Port-au-Prince native, who slips in and out of French, Creole and English with aplomb, climbs high atop ripples of gently sloping hills, pointing out the metal spires of gingerbreads amidst a

scattering of palm and mango trees. Filling the streets are packs of schoolchildren dressed in matching pastel uniforms, and metal fences covered with paintings, for sale by a local artist, of Haitian women wading in fields.

The brutality of the earthquake is underscored even further in downtown Port-au-Prince, where a sea of tents in the Champs de Mars plaza, situated opposite the toppled National Palace, provides flimsy shelter for thousands of still-homeless Haitians. "Nothing of any significance has been rebuilt in Port-au-Prince, other than the superb restoration of the Iron Market," Mangonés says. Indeed, the 120-year-old open-air structure, which was incinerated in the aftermath of the earthquake, has just reopened thanks to a \$12 million donation from Irish telecom mogul Denis O'Brien. Funding for the project, overseen by U.K. architect John McAslan and partners and ISPAN, was contingent upon the restoration being completed in just one year. Miraculously, the project met the deadline, and today the fire-engine-red structure has reopened with buoyant local sellers offering billowy caftans, art and traditional Haitian fare.

Still, Mangonés explains, reconstruction efforts in Port-au-Prince remain frustratingly slow. "There are two or three relatively vague plans for reconstruction of certain neighborhoods," she says. "No global coherence. No idea where the money will come from."

Undeterred by the mire of bureaucratic and municipal challenges riddling the country, FOKAL is in the process of purchasing a semidestroyed gingerbread and prepping it to become a training center that will offer an up-to-two-year course that simultaneously restores the property and educates Haitians on the building's architectural style. "It is important to us to have a place where the story can be told; a story that can help young Haitians grow," she says. "This project carries the promise of the original Haiti, one that has yet to be fulfilled."

On a balmy February evening, Vivian Gauthier watches as her student's bare feet twist on and slap the cool terra-cotta floor lining her veranda. A musician grips a drum with his knees, nodding his head to the beat. Whether or not FOKAL succeeds, Gauthier has decided to turn her home into a museum—one that pays homage to her love of dance and, more important, to her own

gingerbread. With no children, the task has fallen to Gauthier to ensure the house remains untouched long after she is gone. "As poor as we are, these houses are special to Haiti; they don't exist anywhere else," she says. Oversize closets in every bedroom are stuffed with floor-length taffeta costumes encrusted with metallic sequins. Tables are covered with stacks of dusty LPs of Carole King and Mendelssohn violin concertos. "It's part of our responsibility to give something to other generations," she says. "To show them where we came from."

Behind her a sheer white curtain undulates from a gust of wind, and she adds, "If no one does anything, our heritage will be lost." ♦