Art meets Engineering: DAM Caribbean

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Even if you're not familiar with the name DAM Caribbean, you have most likely interacted with, and even admired some of its projects. From master planning of national critical infrastructure, to upgrades of schools, clinics, historical sites and other public spaces, and projects artfully conceptualised and made into reality, the small architecture firm has been making its name in St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius over the past eight years.

DAM Caribbean was founded by Managing Director and Architect Wouter Schipper, who runs the firm with Project Architect Charlotte Schipper and Office Manager Suzanne Hadders.

Part of what sets the company apart is the embracing of technology, not just for the planning and completion of projects, but in communicating the vision to clients in the design stage.

Rather than relying solely on drawings and models, the firm invites clients to experience and explore projects in an interactive way, by using video and 360° virtual reality. It gives a realistic sense of dimension, a preview of how every element plays into each other, and how the space will feel.

"The experience of space never changes," says Wouter, "but embracing technology is important." To him, being successful in the field is all about balancing art and feeling with engineering and craftsmanship. This entails remaining flexible and creative, while making the most of

both traditional and modern techniques, and focusing on practicality and the optimal use of space.

The strong focus on both art and engineering is reflected in Wouter's extensive educational, training and work history, which includes civil and building engineering, the use of ecological materials, modern architecture, art and urban design.

He had access to, and was inspired by the largest private architectural library in Europe, where he could delve into the rich history of the field, during his training at the office of Cees Dam.

Between 2006 and 2010, he was trained under the supervision of Cees Dam of Dam & Partners Architecten – the renowned, Amsterdam-based architectural firm responsible for Rotterdam's famous Maastoren (near the Erasmus Bridge) and Eneco headquarters, and Amsterdam's Hobbemakade and grand opera house Stopera.

The name DAM Caribbean is in fact an ode to Dam, and also serves to stand for Development, Architecture and Management.

Charlotte earned her Bachelor in Architecture from Delft University of Technology (TU Delft). The degree is ranked top three in the world based on the QS World University Rankings. She started working at DAM Caribbean five years ago and fell in love with the island. She is also responsible for the firm's immersive video and virtual reality tours.

The small team has been behind some very recognisable projects, including Walter Plantz Square, a prime example of how architecture and design can shape the public's experience of a space.

The Square has no doubt helped to breathe new life into the downtown area. The colourful yet calm gingerbread houses complement local architecture, and their openness blurs the line between interior and exterior.

Splashes from the ground fountains cool the area and invite you to be playful and enjoy the whole square, from Front Street to the boardwalk. Hardy palm trees add greenery and visual interest, and provide cooling shade. The colour of the natural stone blends almost seamlessly with the sandy bay nearby. Bathed in light, the Square is also welcoming at night.

Other recognisable projects include The Bastions and flagship stores for EFFY and Majesty Jewelers in Port St. Maarten, master plans for Port St. Maarten and Princess Juliana International Airport, Indigo Bay private residences, upgrades to Sunset Beach Bar and the Government Building entrance, and emergency repairs at Fort Amsterdam.

New projects include The Golden Rock resort in Statia, a hotel with a luxury pool in Saba, and an innovative pool area for The Morgan Resort & Spa (formerly Alegria Boutique Hotel).

As outlined in *The Daily Herald* last week Wednesday, the firm recently released its preliminary design of a brand new, hurricane-proof and eco-friendly building for Sundial School, with the design characterised by a colourful, abstract, semi-open facade.

This concept is complemented by another envisioned project within the same compound: a beautiful complex of rounded buildings, housing the much-needed National Heritage Center – a combination of Philipsburg Jubilee Library, St. Maarten Museum, and Sint Maarten Archaeological Center SIMARC.

These irreplaceable local heritage gems were left ravaged by hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. While nothing is set in stone at this stage, a new, combined centre would mean better collaboration, resources, and better access and involvement for the public. Cees Dam, with his enormous experience in designing museums and complex buildings, joined DAM Caribbean for this project proposal, as senior advisor.

DAM Caribbean moved from Simpson Bay to the Prime Plaza Building on Bush Road just one month ago. Now that the office is renovated, the team is ready to welcome clients at the new location. The team is ready to continue growing and expanding, and is looking forward to some new and exciting structural projects in the near future.

For more information, email DAM Caribbean at info@damcaribbean.sx, call +1 (721) 544 4919, or visit the office in unit #6, on the second storey of the Prime Plaza Building (which houses Carrefour Market). But first, see more impressions for yourself by visiting www.damcaribbean.sx.

In photo: *DAM Caribbean's Managing Director, Architect Wouter Schipper (right) and Project Architect Charlotte Schipper (left) review project plans at the new office.*