



World Heritage within the Kingdom of the Netherlands:

‘HISTORICAL CITY AND PORT OF WILLEMSTAD’ (Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles)

Willemstad is situated on Curaçao, an island belonging to the former Dutch Antilles. Since the second quarter of the 17th century the town has developed from a military base to a port town of consequence. Various locations in the city bear testimony to several phases of growth. Indeed, Willemstad has a number of clearly distinguishable areas. Many of them have their own history and culture, as well as distinctive structures and functions. The town has a historical harbour district and several fortifications in addition to residential areas and business districts for merchants and craftsmen. Former plantations, plantation houses and government quarters also still stand in Willemstad today. Many of the buildings are based on Dutch examples, but have their own distinctive features with influences of other parts of the Caribbean.

The historical centre of Willemstad on Curaçao is a unique example of a trading post and a military island settlement established in the colonial past. The virtually uninterrupted Dutch cultural influence stands out in sharp contrast to that of the Portuguese and Spanish colonizers who dominated elsewhere in South America. The layout of the 17th-century districts, which was based on Dutch town planning and fortress-building tradition is a striking facet of the city. But also the 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century structures engrafted onto the widespread colonial construction and layout display particular integrity and recognisability. One of the most remarkable aspects of Willemstad is the colours of its buildings, which are emphasised even more by the blue of the ports and the surrounding sea. In 1817 it was prohibited to paint the buildings white because of its dazzling effect. Consequently, Willemstad is an incomparable phenomenon in the Caribbean and the South American region – sufficient reason for its inclusion on the World Heritage List in 1997.

The historical town of Willemstad is situated on the south side of the ‘leeward’ island of Curaçao. (‘Leeward’ relates to the ‘trade wind’ in this region). Curaçao is approximately 60 km long and no more than 12 km wide and lies between Aruba and Bonaire off the coast of Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea. Much of the southern part of the island is taken up by spacious residential districts and a refinery along a large natural harbour. The access to this natural port is known as Sint Anna Bay. Old Willemstad developed as from the 16th and 17th centuries around Sint Anna Bay and a much smaller natural port branching off to the east. Here, the World Heritage part of town stretches over a length of approximately 2.5 km and a width of 1 km at most. As it was a relatively large settlement on a small island, the town had no hinterland and therefore no regional function to speak of.

The World Heritage part of Willemstad on Curaçao comprises a central area situated mainly on the western side of Sint Anna Bay and partly on the eastern side of the Bay. This eastern side, with ‘Fort Amsterdam’ and the Punda (Point) district, is the oldest Dutch settlement on the island. This explains why the western side, which can be reached via a pontoon bridge, is known as Otrabanda (the Other Side). The World Heritage site also covers four districts referred to as transition areas. Three of these (Scharloo West, Scharloo East and Pietermaai) are on the eastern side of Sint Anna Bay; the fourth district, Kortijn, is on the western side. And finally there are two buffer zones, one of which is Waagat harbour and its surroundings. The other is an uninterrupted area along the entire western and northern sides of the town.



Willemstad on Curaçao, a brief history

After America was rediscovered by Europe at the end of the 15th century, many mariners and adventurers travelled to the West to try their luck there ('rediscovered' because some hundreds of years earlier the Vikings had already reached America). The islands in the Caribbean also drew a lot of interest, for instance from those who wished to establish plantations for tropical products. The Spaniards gained possession of Curaçao shortly after 1500, but eventually found no use for this small volcanic and coral island. In 1634 the Dutch West-India Company (WIC) took control of the island to set up a supply station. The few Spaniards there and some of the indigenous people were deposited on the Venezuelan coast, after which the island was colonised from Amsterdam by various population groups including a Jewish community, whose offspring still live there today.

It has been deduced from such things as historical maps that the eastern coastal area along Sint Anna Bay was the first area to be organised. A civilian settlement and a pentagonal stone fort called Fort Amsterdam (on the south side of an inland waterway that no longer exists today) were built there. Streets and houses were constructed running roughly from southeast to northwest intersected by the odd side street. A town wall enclosed the entire complex. Later, in the 17th century, the fort was reduced to an irregular quadrangle. Incidentally, the settlement was first referred to as Willemstad in 1680.

Willemstad functioned among other things as a base for warships, from where regular attacks were launched on the coast of South America. The slave trade started around 1660. Willemstad became a centre of African slave trading for all of America, although some of the slaves were forced to work on the plantations on Curaçao itself. Profits were not gained quickly, however. The (first) WIC was dissolved in 1674. Another West-India Company was established a year later, upon which the city flourished. This prosperity resulted in the expansion of Willemstad at the end of the 17th or the beginning of the 18th century. The canal between the fort and the settlement was filled in and the rectangular, somewhat fanned out street plan was extended. Many companies, houses and facilities were built in this new town quarter, among which, in ca. 1730, a synagogue, which today is the oldest in the New World.

The oldest part of the town – Punda – initially had a 17th-century Dutch character with narrow, multi-storey houses at right angles to the streets. This was followed by a period in which Baroque influences can be discerned. During the 18th and 19th centuries 'tropical neoclassicism' would play a major role; the architectural style merged to ever greater extents with the prevailing architecture of the region, which was mainly rooted in Southern Europe, sometimes resulting in the addition of galleries, arcades, porticos and (covered) balconies constructed beyond the original building lines. And, as already noted, as of 1817 the buildings were no longer allowed to be painted white and so were colour-washed for the most part in soft colours. The plan of the city changed drastically between 1860 and 1864. As the town walls had lost their protective function by that time, they were demolished, after which the town could be expanded to the north and to the east.

This resulted, among other things, in the Handelskade (Trade Wharf).

During the course of the 19th and 20th centuries the town's commercial centre shifted more and more to the other side of Sint Anna Bay. During the 1930s parts of Punda were redeveloped and in 1969 large fires raged there as a result of riots. Punda therefore has relatively few historical buildings.



The opposite side of Sint Anna Bay – Otrobanda – wasn't developed until the beginning of the 18th century. However, there were many similarities to Punto along the waterfront. A quay was realised here by building up the natural bank. Some of the buildings were erected some dozens of metres from the waterside. Although Otrobanda's layout was also largely based on a rectangular street plan, its initial design was considerably more spacious. The buildings were much larger and stood on larger plots, and the houses included porticos and arcades from the onset and many of them had two floors. Baroque influences could be seen in Otrobanda as well.

Some of the open character of the quarter was lost through constant condensing and a network of alleys with predominantly small, modest buildings developed behind the main streets. The urban middle class as well as many of the working population lived in Otrobanda. During the course of the 19th century Otrobanda expanded northwards and uphill, thus reducing the building density and enabling similarities to the plantation houses from outside the city. The increasing importance of this quarter manifested itself, among other things, in the Queen Emma Bridge, a pontoon bridge built in 1888. This pedestrian bridge over Sint Anna Bay still connects the quays opposite and the Punda and Otrobanda quarters. Sint Anna Bay, together with Punda and Otrobanda, is the heart of the section of town that has been designated as a World Heritage site.

The north-western part of Otrobanda developed after the alley quarter. It dates from the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The Kortijn plantation once covered this area, hence the quarter's name. It comprises a few monumental buildings dating from this period. They contain neoclassic features but are generally smaller than those in the older part of town. Further condensing occurred in Kortijn during the course of the 20th century. The World Heritage Committee has designated the Kortijn quarter as a transition area.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Pietermaai quarter developed outside the protective town wall and at some distance from Punda. This quarter extends along the southern coast of Curaçao and partially also east of the Waaigat. Pietermaai is based mainly on a linear structure, with buildings placed at right angles to the main axis. The quarter was endowed with urban villas, grand buildings and many smaller buildings. The premises mix 18th century appearance with neoclassic character and are colour-washed in various colours.

The Scharloo quarter developed north of the Waaigat as from the middle of the 19th century. Centuries-old plantations were established here, but were gradually incorporated into the urban sphere. Many buildings were erected here, the majority of which were owned by Jewish merchants. They were mostly two-floor country houses on spacious lots. The architectural style is predominantly neoclassical, with prominent frontons and pillars – with a colonial character – but Baroque influences can also be identified. Obviously, the outer walls of these houses have also been stuccoed and colour-washed.

There are hardly any historical buildings of consequence in the buffer zones around the Waaigat and on the outer edge of the old town. These areas were (re)developed and (partly) provided with modern buildings in a more recent past. These used to be an open field of fire for Fort Amsterdam between Punda and Pietermaai. The outer edge of the old town was not subdivided until later due to its distance from the old town centre and its use as plantations.



Willemstad on Curaçao was the actual capital of the Netherlands Antilles during the Dutch colonial period. For this reason the town could boast not only the government buildings, but many other representative premises as well, among which several military and state buildings. Business offices, premises for ship-owners and banks and administrative offices were built here as well. These functions and institutions continued to exist even after the colonial status was officially abolished in 1954. Important to the economy and development of the island and the town was the establishment of a Shell oil refinery during World War I. Shell disposed of its refinery in 1984, but the installations are still running.

Willemstad on Curaçao today

Willemstad lies on the island of Curaçao, one of the Leeward Islands off the coast of Venezuela which belong to the Lesser Antilles. Curaçao lies in the tropics, at approximately 12° north latitude and at 68° west longitude. The Greater and Lesser Antilles lie in the Caribbean Sea and form an elongated archipelago shaped like a hair-pin reaching from Cuba to Aruba. Three of the Leeward Islands off the Venezuelan coast were age-long Dutch colonies (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao), as were three much smaller Windward Islands (Saba, Sint Eustatius and part of Sint Maarten, the other part being French). Curaçao is centrally situated between Aruba and Bonaire and is the largest of the six islands. This was one of the reasons that it became the 'main island' of the Netherlands Antilles. Willemstad is situated on the south-west side of Curaçao, which is roughly speaking approximately twice the size of the Dutch island of Texel. This hilly island has several bays which could function as natural ports. The largest and most important is St. Anna Bay, which also provides access to the much wider Schottegat. A large oil refinery was established on the north side of the Schottegat already before World War II and contributed to Willemstad's continuing growth. The town was also the centre of trade and the seat of the Colonial Government of 'the West'.

As from the end of December 1954 the Netherlands Antilles became a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands that was drawn up at that time (and later modified several times) stipulates that the Kingdom comprises Aruba, the Netherlands Antilles and the Netherlands. Each of these has its own government, but they all have one Head of State (the King or Queen), one Minister for Foreign Affairs and one army. The countries are autonomous with respect to internal affairs, but constitute one Kingdom vis-à-vis foreign countries. Willemstad is the capital of the Netherlands Antilles. Later, Bonaire opted for a 'status apart'. In 2005 Curaçao announced its intention to change to a 'status apart' and Sint Maarten is also working towards a similar status within the Kingdom. Their target date is 1 July 2007. This will mean that Willemstad will no longer be the capital of the Netherlands Antilles.

Over the past few decades Willemstad and Curaçao have become an important tourist centre in the Caribbean. Consequently, dozens of large and small hotels and countless facilities have been built for guests from abroad. Furthermore, many houses burned down in Punda in 1969. The resulting redevelopment of historical structures over the past few years is an eyesore in some places, especially along the waterfront and in the old town. At other places the city has been more successful in adapting the scale and shape of new buildings to local conditions. 'Retro-architecture' or post-modern forms have occasionally been applied. Meanwhile, as part of the modernisation efforts, some new roads were laid in the town. This meant that several places had to be opened up, including in Otrobanda. This development also divided Scharloo into a western and an eastern section and a traffic route was realised around the Waaiat.



Nevertheless, many historically valuable features have been preserved in the centre of Willemstad. The town has an exceptionally rich mixture of styles and shapes covering the entire period from the early 17th century up to and including the early 20th century. The typical 17th-century and 18th-century shapes and functions which were engrafted onto Dutch urban and military architecture are well represented here. Some of them were adapted (later) to the tropical climate through architectural modifications. Buildings with influences of the Baroque and Neoclassical architecture based on Southern European examples are also widespread. The late 19th century and the 20th century can be recognised in the town expansions and in the harbour districts. Most of the buildings have been stuccoed and colour-washed in a range of colours; the townscape is thus characterised by a richly variegated colour palette.

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