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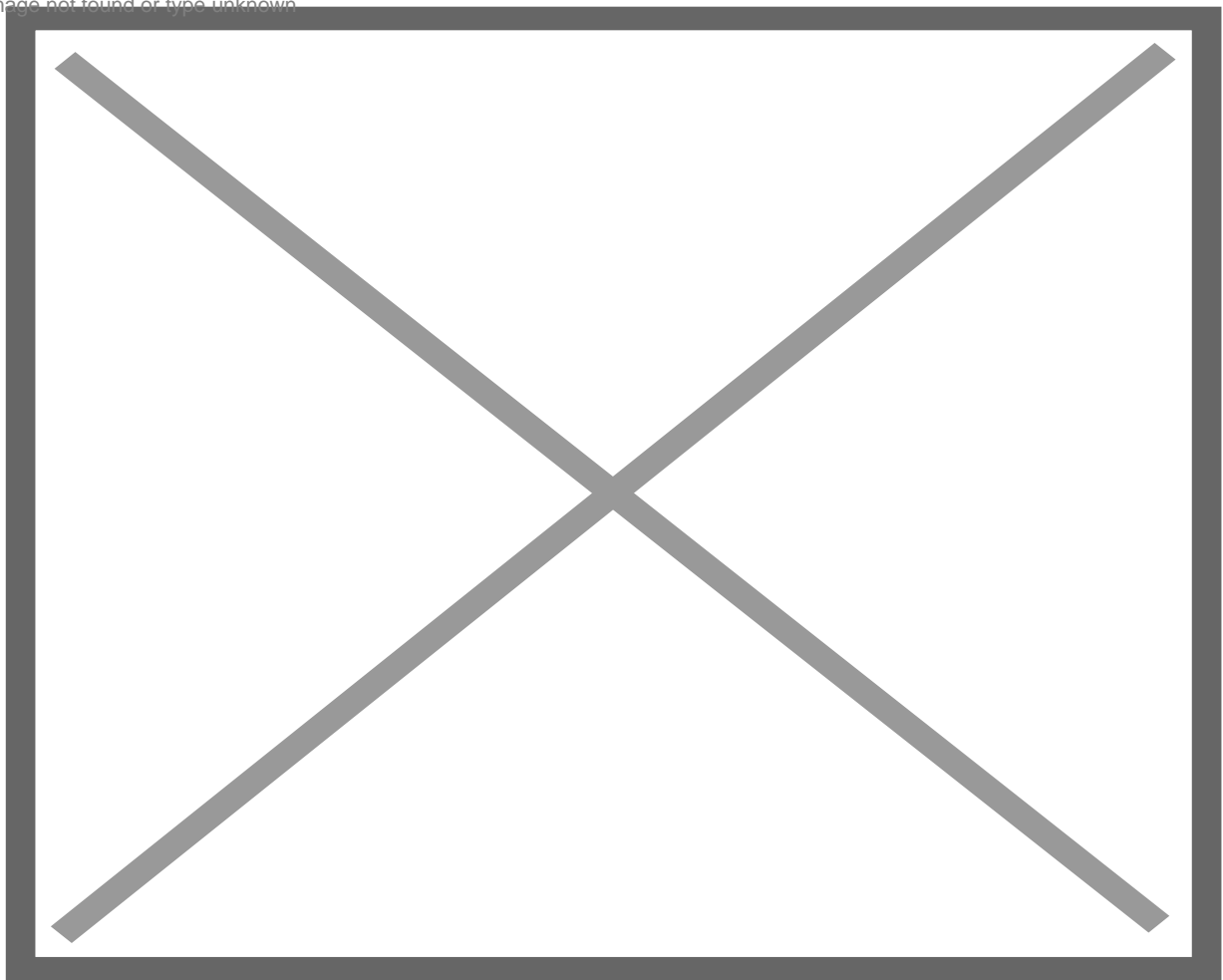
'They Don't Check Things in the VI': Blackbeard's Castle Owner Admits to Unauthorized Renovations Amid Lax Regulatory Expectations

Owner learns hard lesson in preservation compliance after flouting Virgin Islands regulations

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Blackbeard's Castle in St. Thomas, USVI.

During this week's meeting to review ongoing rehabilitation projects across the island, the St. Thomas/St. John Historical Preservation Committee expressed frustrations over the scant regard those behind the Blackbeard's Castle renovation project have paid to the approval process.

“This is one of the things I was trying to request approval on – this change that’s already been done without prior approval,” said property owner Steve Sigler, showing committee members a new roof and porch canopy over the ticket booth, one of “several items I’m asking for approval on after the fact, obviously.”

The unauthorized improvements included the construction of a ADA-compliant ramp, approval for which was supposed to be the subject of the day’s application. Committee chair Akil Peterson noted that this was not the first time the HPC had been approached after the fact.

Mr. Stigler admitted that he had been advised that permitting regulations were lax in the territory. “Just being straight up honest,” he said. “I was told...in the Virgin Islands they don’t check on stuff...everything will be kind of an as-built, is basically what was suggested to me.” He conceded that he had miscalculated in his approach. “Obviously that’s not the case. You’re doing your due diligence and watching it like a hawk,” Mr. Stigler said. He accepted that he was at fault for trying to rush the process, explaining that it was in an effort to ensure that the property could open in time for peak season.



Blackbeard's Castle in St. Thomas, USVI.

Explaining that his financial health was dependent on the success of the property as a going concern, Mr. Stigler compared himself to the main character in the Herman Wouk novel turned Jimmy Buffet musical Don’t Stop the Carnival. Just as the beleaguered Norman Paperman was beset by a series of disasters drawn from a fictionalized portrait of life on a tropical Caribbean island, so was he, Mr. Stigler implied. “Money keeps going out. No money is coming in,” he lamented. He apologized for “listening to people that are around me and thinking that certain verbal acceptance on things is the green light to move forward,” and promised to adopt a more formal approach moving forward.

Mr. Petersen pushed back, saying that the committee had in fact been trying to work closely with Mr. Stigler to ensure that his project could move forward smoothly while still adhering to proper processes. “We gave our time, came out to your guys, hashed everything out in person. We gave you the opportunity to then present. You went and made changes to your original design without

permits. And then we asked you to provide a drawing for your ADA ramp and you go ahead and still do whatever you want to do.”

The STT/STJ HPC Chair expressed frustration at what he viewed as a repeated flouting of regulatory requirements. “We’re trying to work with you but you guys just keep on overstepping,” said Mr. Petersen.

Nevertheless, the committee continued to consider the application before them, engaging in discussion about Mr. Stigler’s plans for future construction, until committee member Enrique Rodriguez asked about the windows that would be installed. “I was told that basically your windows are already on site, windows that have not been approved by us,” Mr. Rodriguez said, querying whether it was Mr. Stigler’s plan to also install these components without prior approval. “I’m really disappointed how you’ve been misled,” Mr. Rodriguez remarked.

Mr. Stigler, who said that he had not been privy to earlier decisions that resulted in some regulatory hurdles for the property, told committee members that he was initially told that “the property wasn’t an historic thing,” or that certain buildings on the property did not require the strict regulations that the tower itself might. “Call me stupid or naive, I just assumed that if it was aesthetically pleasing...that it would be okay,” he said, referring to the work done on the property.

He once again committed to ensuring that the proper steps were following in the approvals process, noting that the windows were ordered months ago. “I just got to figure out what we can do from this point on to get back in your good graces and be on the same team again,” Mr. Stigler remarked.

Although Mr. Rodriguez assured Mr. Stigler that “we’re not here to stop an economic goldmine like this for the committee,” he emphasized that “we are definitely required to preserve what needs to be preserved.” As the owner of Blackbeard’s described more construction and demolition work that had been conducted without the knowledge or oversight of the committee, HPC member Kurt Marsh proposed that work on the property be halted until clear boundaries and guidelines for communication have been established. “All of these things probably just really need to stop until there’s some sort of comprehensive conversation about what you’re trying to do on this property,” he suggested.

“We appreciate you owning your mistakes,” Mr. Marsh assured Mr. Stigler. “But at this point I think there really needs to be an additional sit down outside of this session so that we don’t waste everyone else’s time....We don’t want to see you waste any more money. We don’t want to be annoyed and exhausted by you coming before us on multiple occasions with your project, and so I think a safe way to move forward is to just stop, regroup, and then figure out a plan ahead.”

Noting that Mr. Stigler was already under a stop work order, and pledging to work closely with him moving forward to ensure compliance with historical preservation laws, Sean Krigger, director of the State Historic Preservation Office urged the committee to approve the work that had already been done, so that the project could move forward under closer guidance.

The committee ultimately approved the ramp subject to simultaneous approval from the building permits division of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. The roof and overhang over the ticket booth was also approved, as were the landscaping modifications that had been completed. Approvals for a proposed second pool were held in abeyance pending further design development, and any other modifications have been placed on hold until the HPC has a chance to review and approve the work being done.

