Archaeology in Jamaica

Before every major construction project is finalized, an archaeological and heritage impact assessement must be done. What's that?

Remains of the early inhabitants are buried all over Jamaica. From time to time developers excavating or clearing land for road or property construction, uncover the skeletal remains of representatives of the various groups which have lived in Jamaica at one time or another. Most times to the untrained eye, a body is just a body and it is only through archaeological research that we can begin to make sense of these remains, as we put together the pieces of the puzzle. The various sites associated with our ancestors, are non renewable resources. Therefore, once they are destroyed the chance of studying them as a means of learning about our past is also destroyed. In the case of the Tainos, Jamaica’s first inhabitants, the fact of their extinction means that archeological research is one of the most important ways of learning about their lives.

For this reason, the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, the government agency with responsibility for protecting the country’s material cultural heritage conducts Archaeological and Heritage Impact Assessments (AIAs and HIAs). The assessments are conducted on sites slated for development including those marked for road construction, hotel and housing developments, or even for mining purposes.

But what exactly is an Archaeological Impact Assessment? It is the systematic analysis of a development project’s potential effect on the heritage and archaeological resources of the development area. It is conducted to provide information and recommendations to guide decision-making and necessary modifications by development agencies and private entities, with a view to protecting and preserving the material cultural heritage.

Where a site of historical or archeological significance is perceived to be in danger, a preservation order is usually granted, barring any development work until the requisite research has been conducted. Sometimes developers are asked to shift the proposed path of the development to preserve the site. In cases where this cannot be done and the site is regarded as being of historical or archaeological significance the development project can either be scrapped or subjected to an archaeological rescue project.

The rescue project facilitates recovery of information and artifacts at the site for further study and conservation. A recommendation can also be made to conduct further investigations through intrusive archaeological work or watching briefs while the work is being done on the site. In the construction of the present North Coast Highway Improvement Project, Segment 1, a Taino burial site was recovered in Hanover. The site was such that there was little room for maneuvering by the developers, so the JNHT team recovered the human remains and associated artefacts, recorded the site and allowed the highway to continue on its scheduled course. In other sections of the North Coast Highway, whole townships like that of Rio Bueno in Trelawney and historical landmarks such as the Bengal Bridge and the old wharf have been saved.

Steps in conducting an Archaeological Impact Assessment

The first step in the Archaeological Impact Assessment is the identification of the historic resources of the area to be developed. This begins with a literature review (Desk Based Assessment) in the JNHT’s sites and monument records, the National Library of Jamaica and the National Archive in Spanish Town. This is followed by a site visit/archaeological appraisal to assess the material evidence left behind given the historical background of the particular area.

So for example, research might indicate that the site was once a Taino village or the site of an 18th century sugar plantation or a combination of both. The archaeological team would then visit the site to assess the accuracy of the information. The team will then assess and analyze the impact of the proposed work on significant resources.

Before 1993 the three large sites of Port Royal, Seville and Spanish Town were subjected to AIA’s in order to identify and retrieve archaeological information and resources to assist in the interpretation of the history of these three sites. In 1994, the development of the North Coast Highway network commenced. One of the preliminary steps for this project was the conducting of a Heritage Impact Assessment before the construction phase began with a view to protect the heritage resources along the corridor.

As a result more than fifty sites were identified and 90% of these have been preserved. These sites include small Jamaican vernacular houses, whole historic townships, bridges monuments such as the Queens Highway Marker, sugar estate complexes with finger wharves, sugar factories and warehouses such as Cove and Barbican Estates in Hanover, a windmill tower at Paradise, Hanover and a Baptist Manse in Kew, Hanover. In Kingston, the JNHT is working with the National Housing Trust (NHT) to save some of the historic buildings on Tower Street (downtown Kingston) even as they look towards improving the conditions of inner-city communities.

Since then and primarily in partnership with its sister agency NEPA, the JNHT has conducted AIA’s on more than 40 additional sites. These range from housing developments such as Liberty Hill in St Ann, Highway 2000, and constructions such as the Grande Palladium Hotel in Point, Hanover. The result of the assessments is that a large body of information and countless artifacts have been recovered, and many heritage sites saved and protected for posterity.

Of course from time to time the JNHT, with its focus on preservation, finds itself at odds with other entities whose primary goal is development at all costs. In2000 the JNHT was successful in placing a preservation order on the Bushy Park Aqueduct in St. Catherine to prevent its destruction to facilitate the construction of the Old Harbour Bypass. Within hours of the expiration of the preservation notice, eight spans of the structure were bulldozed.