

SPOTLIGHT



The Portico partnership consists of (l) Elizabeth Newman and Doris Gross.



PORTICO STYLE

The best of tropical and contemporary design

By **Ruth Chisholm**

Photographed by **Andre Rattigan**

Elizabeth Newman and Doris Gross like to remain under the radar, but their work hasn't gone unnoticed. Portico Architecture Planning and Interior Design opened its doors in 1996 and the partnership has led to breathtaking spaces around the island including a bevy of residential developments, restoration projects, villas and corporate offices.

Neither Newman or Gross were born and raised in Jamaica, but they have both made it their home for over 20 years. Prior to establishing Portico, Elizabeth Newman called Boston, Massachusetts her home. She studied at the Boston Architectural College and is a registered architect in Massachusetts and Jamaica. Doris Gross, born in Germany, studied civil engineering and planning at the Technical College in Alsfeld.

Both principals deeply believe in the elegance of Jamaican architecture of the past and aspire to incorporate this into their work as they pursue tropical architecture. "Environmental elements, cultural aspects and ways of living are crucial to success," says Newman. Their belief in designs where outside and inside are not at odds, the maintenance of trees for shade, and consideration of airflow are all rooted in the Portico culture.

"In pursuit of the contemporary styles, beauty inspired by colonial spaces, creative uses of wood, balusters and casement windows... things that are suitable for this climate...are seen less and less," says Doris Gross.





An upcoming Portico project is Bessa, a boutique villa community in Oracabessa, St Mary, which is a joint venture between the KLE Group and Sagcor Life.



Bessa is an 8-acre ocean front property which will have 54 units.



The new Jamaica College auditorium was designed by Gross and Newman.

Of all the projects that Newman and Gross have worked on, perhaps the one that has left the greatest impact was the St Michael's Garden project. Once a great house, the Smokey Vale property has been transformed into collection of airy homes, open and well lit, while well shaded from the sun. This captivating property includes 11 units, each with their own appeal. The residences, while different in appearance, have a consistent openness in the designs.

The genesis of the St Michael's garden project was due to a group of friends and acquaintances coming together to create homes that felt secure, yet open. The desire was for spaces that were unique, had connections to greenery, had privacy, but, still with a sense of community. Typical townhomes, mirror images of one another, with the limiting green space just could not meet these requirements. So, with pooled resources St Michael's came to fruition.

"There was flexibility in customizing what you wanted, which was important because each space had its own nuances and its own little piece of history," said Newman, "and we had to be the architects, that was one condition. But this way each owner got what was desired."Gross added, "bigger isn't always better. We kept the sizes of each home reasonable so that we could save more trees."

A bit of the great house structure was also preserved and transformed into an open lifestyle space for dining, entertaining or an afternoon of reading and reflection. One can even see traces of old book shelves where a library once

was with its own bit of history as it was graced by famous influencers including author Ian Fleming. There is a deliberate interconnectivity between the interior and exterior. Anyone would marvel at the inviting gardens and compelling view.

Always open to new challenges, the team recently took on the building of the Jamaica College auditorium. A big part of this challenge was to deliver a space that was aesthetically consistent, and able to house hundreds of students and not resemble a warehouse. The Portico team took an approach that considered an industrial space and the historic appeal of one of Jamaica's oldest high schools.

According to Newman, Jamaica College had experienced a shift in all aspects of institution. "They had just had a change in leadership and this later influenced the changes in the physical space as well. So, while they made advancements with academics and administration, there was a need for a multi-functional space as well. They identified an area where we were asked to create this space to fit into existing aesthetics of the school," Newman added.

Gross said, "we also created a shaded walkway to the side and this made it a little more hospitable." In addition to the auditorium, Newman and Gross also developed the school's gymnasium. "The goal was to always blend the new structures with the historic ambiance of the campus, in cost effective ways," Gross said.

And then there is their latest project, a coastal development called Bessa, which is a joint venture between the KLE Group and Sagcor Life. Nestled in Oracabessa, St Mary, Bessa will have 54 units designed for

pleasure seekers. Imagine an enviable family escape with picturesque St Mary as a fitting backdrop. Bessa features a thoughtfully designed collection of river condos, an array of studios, two and three-bedroom suites and pool villas.

Did Portico find Bessa? Maybe it was the reverse. Either way the resort project seemed to suit the duo perfectly. "When we saw the flavour of it, that it crossed residential and tourist destination-styled projects we thought it was really suited for us," said Newman. "It is truly a beautiful and fantastic site," she added. "It used to be called Golden Seas and it had fallen into disrepair. We were able to salvage some of it and have recreated it into a blend of typical hotel block type rooms with stand-alone villas."

The duo is adding their creative prowess to a hillside home above Orange Grove. This is one of their notable upcoming residential projects that should be completed in late 2017. "It will be a home on the hillside with a slender floor plan, which capitalizes on the view from all living spaces," added Newman.

Portico Limited is also working on large affordable housing developments including a project of 2,000 homes. According to Gross, these projects aim to assist the Government of Jamaica to fill the gaps in the low income housing market.

"We always look forward to interesting development opportunities for resort and lifestyle type projects. Especially those that incorporate a green environment and tropical gardens, fresh tropical architecture, contemporary interiors and a balanced and natural lifestyle." ▲

