

Testimony of

**Mary O'Reilly Dema, Board Chair
Virgin Islands Architecture Center
for Built Heritage and Crafts**

**before the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Committee on Budget, Appropriation and Finance
On Multi-year Lease between the Government of the Virgin Islands and the
Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built Heritage and Crafts**

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Good morning Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory, Chairwoman, 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Appropriation and Finance. Good morning to all other honorable members of the Committee and of the 35th Legislature here today and to everyone in the audience and those listening and viewing by other means.

I am Mary O'Reilly Dema, Board Chair of the Virgin Islands Architecture Center for Built Heritage and Crafts, known as VIAC. I am here to testify in favor of the proposed multi-year lease between the Government of the Virgin Islands and VIAC. We want to lease buildings 1 and 2 of the Old Barracks Property at the address of 21, 22, and 23 Hospital Street, Christiansted. We have had a one-year lease on the property, and are seeking to enter into a longer term lease, fifty years of more to rehabilitate the historic Old Barracks property on Hospital Street, Christiansted, and convert it into an educational center for the historic preservation,

architectural and building arts center that will research, teach, and present the traditions unique to the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean.

What is VIAC?

Madame Chair, I know that you are familiar with our organization because you have provided us with letters of support as we sought federal funding for our project. We have met with some of the members of this august body, and we have provided information about the project to all members in the past and are happy to do so again if you require it. Information about VIAC and the work we are engaged in is available on our website at www.viacstx.com and on our Facebook page and YouTube Channel. We are a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization, with a focus on community economic development which was developed with community input from town plan charettes held by the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority and from the In Search of Identity project, a collaboration of architects, historians, cultural and community activists from the Virgin Islands and Denmark in the aftermath of the Centennial Commemoration of the Transfer of the islands from Denmark to the United States in 2017.

We are administered by a board of directors to include myself as Board Chair, former Congresswoman Dr. Donna Christensen as Vice-Chair, – Jerri Farrante as Secretary, Christiana Williams, as Board Treasurer, and Members Bo Manderup-Jensen of Denmark; Dr. Chenzira Kahina; Robert Schuster; Attorney

Lee Rohn and Jed JohnHope. Our advisory council consists of local, regional, national, and international experts in architecture, culture, education, and community development. We work with PLACE, a 501(c)3 non-profit that serves as our fiscal agent in financial grant management and reporting, community development and historic preservation.

What is our vision?

We believe that the transformation of the Old Barracks Property on Hospital Street, Christiansted into an educational center for the historic preservation, architectural and building arts of the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean will be a catalyst for the evolution of the town of Christiansted. We hope that the center will become an anchor property for a culture and arts economic development corridor which will provide opportunities for workforce development and training, small business development and cultural heritage tourism.

With a special focus on the African Danish historic aesthetic found in Virgin Islands towns and the architectural preservation practices found throughout the Caribbean, VIAC hopes to create a pipeline to degree programs and certifications in association with schools in Puerto Rico, the United States, Ghana, and Denmark. As it develops, VIAC hopes to offer degrees and certifications in building crafts such as metalwork, painting, carpentry, cabinet making, masonry and draftsmanship. We hope to offer classes in the history and culture of the Virgin

Islands and in small business development and entrepreneurship. VIAC wants to research and teach sustainable and resilient building methodologies that address climate change, particularly the issues that face the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean.

I am proud to say that since the Legislature granted us \$75,000 in seed money through the In Search of Identity Project in 2017, we have raised over \$2 million for this project which will take \$12 million to complete.

In 2021, with funding from the Department of Interior Office of Insular Affairs, VIAC convened local, national, and international experts to develop a strategic development plan for the center and in 2023 we received capacity building funding to hire staff in management, grant writing, and administration. We also received funding to begin to develop our pilot programs in conjunction with the partnering institutions that we have begun to establish relationships with. VIAC has recently received its first construction grant of \$750,000 from the National Park Service (NPS) in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). It will require a non-federal match. We have applied for a CDBG Neighborhood Revitalization grant and have filed several other applications towards the complete rehabilitation of the Old Barracks Property.

What challenges are we trying to address?

St. Croix and the entire U.S. Virgin Islands is in a period of transition. The socioeconomic structure that provided stability and prosperity in the latter half of the 20th century has eroded and new approaches to reinvigorating and re-energizing the built environment and the community that lives and thrives here is of utmost importance as the 21st century unfolds. Recent economic pressures caused by the 2013 refinery closure, the 2017 hurricanes and the 2020 COVID pandemic have accelerated the need for innovative and effective approaches to the socioeconomic revival of Christiansted and the island of St. Croix. A key recommendation from the Urban Land Institute's 2018 Report on Christiansted, a post disaster assessment on the best way to address the economic challenges facing the town, was to "make interventions that support the existing physical, social, cultural, economic and environmental fabric with a clear-cut plan and strategy." The report specifically points to the need to "enhance and grow tourism around the island's undervalued assets: land, sea, and other natural environments; historic architectural fabric; unique cultural character, history, and emerging cottage industries."

In the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes, there was a shortage of skilled local workers and an influx of workers from off-island were brought in to do recovery work. According to reports, this inflated the cost of living by as much as 400 percent. Rental prices rose sharply, and local residents were priced out of the

market. With a fear of gentrification in Christiansted and the other historic towns in the Virgin Islands, there is a need for a conscious response to protect family properties and other cultural spaces before they are developed without regard for historic preservation. The territory needs to empower local stakeholders with the necessary skills so they can become a vital part of the rebuilding and recovery of the Virgin Islands economy. There is a future for our young people in the preservation economy. If we provide the infrastructure of craftsmen who are also small businesspeople, we will create jobs and livelihoods with a connection to place. If we use the history of the Barracks Complex to tell the story of the people who lived and worked in the structure, the street, the neighboring communities, the town, the island and the territory, we will create authentic cultural heritage tourism in which many people can participate and grow and thrive in. There is interest in our architectural legacy as many of our structures have withstood extreme climate events for centuries. We have an opportunity to partner with institutions to increase the resiliency of our towns and maybe even an example for other communities.

How will VIAC impact the community?

VIAC's proposal to rehabilitate an historical property into an educational center that will train and educate young people and impact the built heritage by preparing skilled artisans to rehabilitate it, while simultaneously creating a cultural

economic development corridor in the town of Christiansted aligns with these recommendations and will be an important step towards the future. It can be an important contributor to the St. Croix National Heritage Area as that initiative grows and develops. Graduates of the center will become active stakeholders in restoration efforts that can provide affordable housing that will allow residents to work and live in our historic towns. VIAC hopes to contribute to the development of a robust preservation economy in the Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean that will positively impact people, and the built and natural environment.

Madame Chair, I want to thank you and the Committee for your consideration of this multi-year lease. Its approval will be a crucial step in the development of an institution that is already poised to have a positive impact on our community.