

# self-taught to perfection

INTERVIEW BY: Orrett H. Wynter

Moving to Montserrat from Dominica in search of opportunity led Ian “Sugar George” Edwards’ down a path which started at construction labourer, progressed through a myriad of building trades, and has now culminated with him being one of the region’s premier Architectural Designer-Developers.

A self-professed, insatiable desire for continuous learning, along with perseverance and attention to detail has seen him being recently honoured with five (5) prestigious International Awards for Architecture and Property Development in London in late 2012. In a rare personal interview, Sunset Homes’ owner talks about how he got his first break, his inspirations, biggest challenges and his love for football.

**How did architecture start for you?**

It started with construction. I got into construction to escape poverty. I had no formal architectural education. My high school education ended prematurely and I had to fend for myself. I wasn’t a particularly mischievous kid, but sometimes you, or the teachers, don’t quite know your potential or maybe how to deal with certain personalities.

I started off working in construction as a labourer; six months later, I called myself a carpenter. By 21, I was a foreman. Within that time I was able to do all the different trades. I learned very quickly, and it was never enough: carpentry, masonry, plumbing, etc. By 23, I started my own company with about 7 guys.

My best friend in Montserrat was an architect by the name of Ken Cassell. To talk his language when I was in his office in the afternoon, I had to get on his wavelength. I started dabbling, doing my own sketches, and started designing ideas for some of the jobs I worked on. He took me under his wings

and exposed me to the world of design. He gave me the opportunity to also review his drawings and give him my opinion on design challenges that I foresaw that would be faced during construction.

I started doing my own designs. Then I started building what I drew.

**How did you get the name Sugar George?**

We lived in a tiny house in Dominica, right on the main road and my dad used to have many bottles of sugar. His name was George. As a child, my friends passing by could see all these bottles of sugar. They started teasing me by calling me “Sugar George”, and I never liked it.

**That usually makes it stick, doesn’t it?**

Yes, it stuck. It followed me to Montserrat, and then here in Anguilla.

**What came next?**

I came here in 1996 after the volcanic crisis in Montserrat, bought land and designed and built my first villa.



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Which one was that?

That was Splash Villa. Spyglass Villa, and our current home, followed after that. I had to figure out a lot of things myself.

Sometimes it is the best way to learn, isn't it?

I call it Hard Knocks University when people ask me which architecture school I went to. The recent awards and accolades achieved, put the icing on the cake and allowed me to really look back at what we've done over the years. At the awards ceremony, some of the firms we competed against had 800 architects on staff!

We were up against some really good designs, so to actually win was a great honour. After I got the award, I met some architects from New York who got another award the same night. One of them came up to congratulate me and asked if I studied in London or Yale. As I reached out my hand to shake his, I replied, "I'm sorry I did not have the opportunity to finish high school." He laughed and replied that "many of the creative ones were not" [formally trained]. One of my favourite books

is the *Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. Howard Roark [the lead character] was an architect in school, and he dropped out because he felt that the knowledge he was getting was limiting, stifling. I think not having a formal architectural education has probably left me open to ideas. I think of myself as an open box; whatever information I get, I just throw in there and try to sift it out. I get ideas from architects, from tradesmen, from labourers. I respect everyone's opinion. I feel like a sponge, and I just try to absorb everything.

I never feel satisfied; I always want to learn more...to see more. Whenever I travel, I pick up magazines. I look for ideas; I look at other designs, other work, for design inspiration.

Well, they do say there's no original idea. But what really inspires your work?

What inspires me is being able to have an idea and, a year or two later, see it unfold. I feel like an artist. I always want to create. Each time I travel, I see a small idea: a column, a foyer or water feature. It starts like that.



Spyglass Hill Villa

Photo: Rene Guinio

I feel like an artist having something in his head and putting it on canvas. I've always loved construction, not just architecture. The best time I have is when I am on a site, when I'm actually, physically doing work – masonry, carpentry or roofing. I like being on the site; I like the smell of construction – the wood...not so much the pressure treated stuff they have now [he laughs] but the regular pine we used to have before.

Is there any person in the field you admire?

There are a few persons that have played a great role in who I am today, like my friend Ken Cassell. He was instrumental in me actually starting architectural work. I remember years ago, I did a sketch of a house, and I thought it was good. If you look at it today, you'd probably think it was something your toddler drew, so you'd say "good job", but you know it's not the best. He complimented me and told me to keep trying, to keep at it. He would always give pointers... so that was instrumental.

John and Val Barker, who I call

my 'pops' and 'mom', had a profound impact on my career and my life. They have a passion for creating exquisite homes and I learned a lot from our partnership over the years. We are partners in the *Beach House* and also worked together on the *Le Bleu* and *Indigo* properties at Little Harbour Estates.

Well, you are only as good as your client, right?

At the end of the day, the client's input means a lot. We always do it together. It's like a dance. What I like about what I do is that at the end of the day, my clients and I are [the] best of friends. A lot of falling out happens on projects but, fortunately, most of the people I've worked for, the friendships continue today.

What are you working on now?

Most of my work now is in Nevis. We're building condos in Nevis using a poured concrete system to get buildings erected very quickly. We're also doing a bit of procurement for some Caribbean islands - sourcing materials overseas: doors, windows, tiles, etc. Moving forward, I want to concentrate on architecture and

procurement and less so on the construction side of things. I had 70 guys at one point, with different nationalities, languages.

It is difficult to manage so many personalities, isn't it?

Those were some of my most bizarre situations, having to deal with the personalities.

What do you see in the future for Anguilla architecture/real estate?

I think Anguilla has a bright future. Right now we have about 200 villas; very well designed, unique homes. Many of the architects are from overseas, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from them. We're seeing more designs, innovative ideas, larger projects... and we can tap into that.

What do you do when you're not designing?

The only thing that can take my mind off everything is when I play football.

How often do you get to play?

During the season, I might play

twice a week. In the offseason, I might play once per week. Football is my passion; I have a team that I sponsor, coach and play with as well! We have a spirited team and we currently hold the title of AFA Champions of the 2012-2013 League.

What about the bike you came here on?

The Harley? I figured, I have three kids; I've provided for them, so I thought I'd treat myself on my birthday.

You're lucky; my wife would never allow me to get one.

It's easier to ask forgiveness than to ask for permission. Just tell her you got the deal of a lifetime. That's what I did!

Anything else to share?

I remember when my wife, Jan, and I were younger; I would mention things that I wanted to do. I kept telling myself that I had to do these things—to never give up. That's what I'm instilling in my kids. If I can get them to approach life in this way, then I would have done my job. **da**



Picking up one of his 5 awards at the 2012-2013 International Property Awards