

## Little Palm Island Resort: Designing Escape in the Florida Keys

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In his seminal book on tourist theory, *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell claims that those living in contemporary urban societies, people he calls “moderns”, seek an escape from their mechanized, urban, and technology-driven lives to another time or place that seems more “real” or authentic. He writes, For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere; in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles.<sup>1</sup>

Although MacCannell associates the desire to escape with contemporary Western society, escape through travel is neither a recent phenomenon nor one restricted to the West. Escape fantasies have long been one type of reaction to existence in urban and/or mechanized societies. Escape fantasies may be satisfied through tourist travel which emphasizes escape *from* work and pressure, or escape *to* an exotic or seemingly “primitive” location.

Why would tourists desire an “escape” from technology and contemporary life? Certainly not all of them do. Travel fantasies that involve driving fast cars and the simulation of space travel indicate that not everyone wants to escape to a “simpler” place. Still, many travel experiences are designed to cater to nostalgia for a more “natural” way of life thought to be elsewhere. Ironically, in many tourist “escape” experiences, the technologies and amenities from which the traveler supposedly desires to escape continue to be made available in some form, creating a safe illusion of escape.

This presents a challenge for the architects and designers of tourist facilities. Lodging design and location can play a significant role in the experience or fantasy of escape. This *architecture and design of escape* might be culture-specific or more vague, a general typology that represents various fantasies of escape from the developed world. One of the most widely used structures in resort architecture representing escape is the thatched hut.

<sup>2</sup> Thatched hut resorts have become prevalent in the last 30 years. The thatched hut is a form that speaks of simplicity of life, “primitive” or pre-industrial society, and remote, exotic locations. Although some contemporary societies continue to live in villages or even cities made up of thatched buildings and their economic and social structures are far from simple, the thatched hut continues to be used as a symbolic form of “escape”. This relationship between thatched hut and the “primitive” has a long history. The thatched hut resort today represents a contradiction that has long existed in travel: the quest for escape from one’s own culture, which has gotten too complex and overwhelming, tempered by the fear of the unknown and a desire to retain familiar comforts. Thatched hut resorts can cater to both desires, as we will see, in ways that are both clever and ironic.

In this paper I will examine one thatched hut resort, Little Palm Island, in detail. I will discuss how this resort functions as a representation of escape while providing the expected comforts and familiar technologies. In my analysis, I will examine not only the physical design of the property and its location on a private island, but also the experience provided by the staff and development company that supports the physical messages of the architecture itself. First it is necessary to discuss in more detail the typology of the thatched hut and its use in resort architecture in the second half of the 20th Century.

In Western writings and philosophy the thatched hut has long been equated with the “primitive”. Vitruvius wrote of the “primitive hut” as the first dwelling. The notion of the simple thatched hut as the “primal” example of architecture continued to be popular in the writings of the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> The idea of the “primitive” hut and “primitive” life in general is addressed increasingly in the 18th Century with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Marc Antoine-Laugier, in his first *Essai sur l’Architecture*, equates the hut with development of “primitive” man as well as the roots of architecture.<sup>4</sup> In these writings, the hut represents a “primal” structure and the roots of

“civilized” dwellings rather than a symbol of escape *from* civilization *to* the “primitive” world.

The Romantic Movement is responsible for the connection between the primitive and escape in Western thought. The Romantics reacted against the rapid mechanization and urbanization in Europe and the progressive philosophy of the Enlightenment thinkers. Some romantics urged retreat to a more organic existence. One of the most obvious examples of the desire to escape is found in German Romantic Friedrich Leopold Stolsberg's *Die Insel*. On *The Island*, a new kind of society is born. Those who have escaped civilization to live there in simple huts are more in touch with nature and live in harmony with each other.<sup>5</sup>

Romanticism's influence on 19th Century painting is evident in the work of Gauguin, who painted his own colonial-era fantasy of escape to a “primitive”, unspoiled life on an island with native people he both admired and exploited. The remote island was a constant representation in tales of exploration and colonial expansion, and this representation was often quite celebratory compared to descriptions of mainland continents conquered by European outsiders.<sup>6</sup> Also, the island itself is geographically suited to fantasies of escape because it is surrounded by water and therefore appears more physically remote than other destinations.

Considering the association of romantic notions of escape to primitivism and the association of the “primitive” life with the thatched hut, one can see why this form has been appropriated for use in resort design as a typology of escape located on an island that itself has come to represent remoteness and difference. Although there is no way to prove that all the travelers that go to these resorts are seeking escape, there is evidence that this is the experience that is being marketed to them, as we will see in the case of Little Palm Island.

The thatched hut style of resort has become increasingly prevalent since the 1960's with the beginning of the growth of mass tourism. The first major thatched hut resorts for tourists were built in the 60's on various islands of the Pacific, including Tahiti, Bora Bora, and Western Samoa.<sup>7</sup> This area of the world evokes the romantic fantasies of the South Seas island paradise with beautiful “natives” provided by artists and writers like Gauguin and Loti. Later, anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and 20th century travelers including American G.I.'s stationed in the Pacific in World War II reinforced the association of island cultures with rustic simplicity and romantic escape.

Later in the 1970's more thatched hut resorts were built on islands such as Bali and the Hawaiian Islands.<sup>8</sup> The thatched hut resort also became popular at mainland beach resort areas in Mexico and Latin America. Travel to these areas is increasingly not limited to foreign tourists seeking the exotic

“other”, but to urban domestic tourists as well.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, thatched hut resorts are generally limited to the islands of Hawaii and the Caribbean, although so-called “tiki huts”, open thatched structures popularized in the 1950's, are prevalent on beaches or at pools.<sup>10</sup> One of the few thatched resorts outside of the Hawaiian and Caribbean islands is Little Palm Island, located in the Florida Keys. The island location provides an excellent setting for the architecture and design of escape. There is no specific cultural association here, although, as we will see, fantasies of other times and places are evoked in the resort design. There are certainly no references to the original indigenous inhabitants of the area. The main symbolic emphasis at Little Palm is on escape *from* the complexities of contemporary urban society rather than escape *to* a specific place.

Little Palm Island is a tiny five-acre island located 15 minutes by boat from Little Torch Key in the lower Florida Keys. The resort was under private ownership until developer Ben Woodson purchased it and opened the Little Palm Island Resort in 1988.<sup>11</sup> He hired architect Jose Gonzalez to design 14 thatched roof huts as spacious suites on the island. In 1996, the resort was purchased by developer Pat Colee and Noble House Resorts. A devastating hurricane, Georges, hit in 1998 and caused severe damage to the island, providing an opportunity for extensive renovations to Little Palm by Noble House Resorts. Architects Edward DeLeon and Carl Meyers, and interior designer Marcie De La Rosa were hired to redesign the property. DeLeon and Meyers designed a great room/library, a more extensive spa, and redesigned all the interiors. Marcie De La Rosa decorated all the rooms in British Colonial style, Indonesian style, and a vaguely Polynesian style she calls “Bamboo Rooms” – all of which evoke island societies elsewhere during the colonial period.<sup>12</sup>

The fantasy of escape begins for the visitor to Little Palm Island before she/he even arrives at the property. In order to book a room at Little Palm, one must dial the reservation number 1-800-3-GET-LOST. After dialing, the traveler will be put on hold with a voice message promising prompt service from the next available “Escape Planner”. The island may be reached by a 15-minute boat ride from Little Torch Key or by helicopter or seaplane from Miami. For the sake of limiting noise, both flights land on a tiny nearby island and visitors are brought over on a 5-minute boat ride. The necessity of arriving by boat adds to the impression of seclusion and escape even though Little Palm is only 45 minutes from Key West. Escape here means relaxation and seclusion. There is no front desk area to disrupt the fantasy of escape and remind the guest that he/she is in a resort. Instead, there is only an open-air thatched kiosk where the concierge can make arrangements or discuss the final bill.

When guests arrive at their private huts, the architecture and design of escape become central to their travel experience. The staff will bring any meals to the huts, and almost all guests eat

at least breakfast there. The large suites have outdoor showers, a separate sitting room, and enormous four-poster beds.

The huts themselves are all similar from the outside except for size differences. They are made from natural wood boards with roofs of hand-woven thatch. The huts stand on stilts and the spaces between the stilts are filled with bamboo. Hidden beneath and barely visible between the narrow bamboo slats are wires and small fuse boxes for the utilities as well as containers of stored amenities for the room. Throughout the inside and outside of the hut, items associated with technology and contemporary lodgings are hidden or disguised in order to emphasize escape from these things. The box where the guest receives the morning paper is a large hollowed out piece of bamboo, and more bamboo hides the outside light. The deck outside the front door is fashioned of weathered logs that appear to be held together by old rope. Upon closer inspection, however, one can see that they are actually nailed together and the ropes are merely decorative. A folding stool attached to the front of the hut hides two large outdoor electrical outlets. A fire extinguisher is nearly invisible behind a bamboo door.

The interior of the hut provides a much more lavish and comfortable environment than the rustic exterior would imply. The suites are designed in three different schemes: British Colonial, Indonesian, and Polynesian-style "Bamboo Rooms". Each design implies the transporting of the guest to another time and place where one might be staying in a simple hut, but is also enjoying the luxury of the privileged guest or colonial official. Ambience in this case is more important than authenticity and one finds that the "Indonesian" rooms often are decorated with Indian art and that the "Bamboo Rooms", as de la Rosa calls them, are quite vague in their Polynesian references. The majority of the suites are designed in British Colonial style as is the newly built great room/library. I am going to focus on this design scheme in my detailed analysis of the hut interior.

The new interiors were designed to focus more upon the theme of island escape, and to provide another level of luxury that still blended with the thatched-hut theme. All three themes represent escape to destinations geographically removed from South Florida. They also imply an escape in time to colonial-era travel, where one could live in a rustic hut but hold a privileged position that includes luxuries and familiar comforts, allowing the resort to function as a five-star property while still catering to the fantasy of escape. Any allusions to colonial domination and oppression of native people are diffused here, however. The staff is made up mostly of South Florida locals of various ethnicities and both genders. They wear polo shirts and Bermuda shorts over their deep tans, giving the impression that they, too, are guests escaping to paradise. There are no losers in this fantasy; everyone enjoys the comforts of luxury and escape.

The British Colonial suites are furnished with dark wood pieces accented by rattan dressers and chests. Audubon prints of birds hang on the wall and delicate paintings of coconut palms grace the throw pillows. The color palette is light and ceiling fans hang from the thatched roofs of both rooms creating a constant breeze. The floors are hand-painted tile. The central focus of the bedroom is a king-size four-poster bed covered with a romantic canopy of mosquito netting.

Hidden within this environment of escape are the technological devices and amenities that are common (and usually expected) in contemporary hotel accommodations. Wires are carefully tucked away. The ceiling fans have a barely visible wire that goes up into the ceiling and is wrapped with palm frond to make it even less obvious. In the new suites, the air-conditioning vents are made up of stained teak slats that blend with the walls and thatched ceilings. The panel lights in the bathroom are hidden behind a veneer of bamboo. Inside one rattan chest in the main room is the mini-bar, refrigerator, and coffee maker; de la Rosa designed it specifically to hide these items. Lamps are never just lamps but instead are designed from stalks of bamboo or old-fashioned birdcages with only the shades to make their purpose known. Most of the time at night, the lighted candles are sufficient to provide light and add to the ambience. Beneath a rattan table is a surreptitiously placed modem connection. Two technological devices are conspicuously absent from the suites: a telephone and a television. There is an early 20th century-style wall phone in each room, but it can be used only to call the dining room or the concierge. The telephone and the television may be devices most likely to intrude on the fantasy of escape, so they have been removed from the suites. They have not been removed from the resort, however; they have just been carefully hidden. A phone is found in what the staff claims was the actual outhouse that Harry and Bess Truman used when they stayed on the island. A television, which was recently added per guest requests, is hidden behind decorative curtains in the new great room/library.

Contemporary technologies and services are hidden not only in the suites and the great room, but also throughout the island. The lines that run electricity and water to the island may only be seen on the sandbars when the tide is low. Waste and fuel are brought in and removed daily from Big Pine Key early in the morning before most guests leave their huts. Outdoor lights for the paths between the bungalows are hidden in trees or under bushes. Fire hoses and fuse boxes are tucked inside natural wooden structures that resemble birdhouses and small huts. If one is not looking for these things, however, they are not evident and do not intrude on the fantasy of escape. The lush vegetation of the island was carefully designed by landscapers, from the coconut palms to the flowers and bushes around the huts that provide further privacy. At check-out time, guests need only to board one of the old-fashioned boats and head back to civilization 15 minutes away.

Little Palm Island provides an elaborate experience of escape for the tourist through the hiding of technologies and amenities, and a design that emphasizes the rustic elegance of a comfortable thatched hut with an exotic theme. Architect Edward DeLeon emphasized in his interview that the vision shared by the architects, designer, and developer was one of a resort that emphasized escape to another place and time on a tropical island.<sup>13</sup> This is a very different experience than one would have at a standard hotel catering to families or business travelers. At business hotels, technologies are readily available and made purposely visible. Casual interviews with guests at Little Palm indicated that most were eager to get *away* from work, children, and daily stresses, and that they loved the quiet and seclusion of the island.

Still, the architecture and design of escape may not always be user-friendly for the contemporary traveler. Interior designer Marcie De La Rosa claims that the biggest complaint from guests is that they can't find something because it is hidden. The inability to locate the mini-bar in the rattan chest, or the hair dryer, which is discreetly tucked away in the drawer of the old-fashioned vanity seems to cause frustration to some that are used to having their mechanical devices and amenities readily available.<sup>14</sup> The resort that offers escape with comfort must be designed to walk the fine line between escape fantasies and desired technologies. The architects and designers of resorts cannot ignore how dependent much of the world's population is on technologies and the comforts they bring and how reluctant we are to part with them. Little Palm provides packaged escape coupled with familiar comforts and the knowledge that this "secluded" island is only minutes from the Florida Keys. This experience mirrors the contradictions of the tourist: urban travelers depend upon technological systems so completely that even the fantasy of escaping them is tempered by comforting knowledge that they are nearby if needed.

Is escape travel reflective only of late 20th century Western culture where the packaging of leisure and culture into brief travel experiences has become increasingly prevalent and affordable? I would argue that the difference is more one of degree than a philosophical shift. Escape travel becomes part of societies as they become urbanized and industrialized. As technological development expands, so does the desire to escape to another place, another culture, or to one's own past romanticized by the distance of time.

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Phone interview with Edward DeLeon, architect for Little Palm Island renovation, March 16, 2001.

Phone interview with Edward Tuttle, architect, March 2, 2000.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 3.

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<sup>3</sup> William Alexander McClung, *Architecture of Paradise: Survivals of Eden and Jerusalem* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 43-44.

<sup>5</sup> Edith Amelie Runge, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Sturm und Drang Literature* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1972), pp. 279-288.

<sup>6</sup> There are many reasons for this. Islands in the Pacific were the source of great joy to sailors who were near death or nearly bored to death in the expansive ocean. Trade for provisions or human companionship made islands key for the survival of expeditions like those of Cook, Bougainville, and those who followed. For examples, see Bernard Smith's *Imagining the Pacific*, Robert Nicole's *The Word, the Pen and the Pistol: Literature and Power in Tahiti*. Although there were many violent incidents with island residents during colonial expansion, the writings and art of the 18 and 19th centuries tended to depict islands as unspoiled and pristine rather than dark and dangerous. In *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*, Ian Strachan points out that fantasies of paradise on an island go back to Greek mythology (22). For examples of how continents have been depicted differently, see the writings on South Africa in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, or writings on Brazil in Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*. In spite of the paradise myth, island peoples were still depicted as base and savage in many written descriptions.

<sup>7</sup> Information obtained through dates provided in the *Official Hotel Guide*, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (Seacaucus: Reed Travel Group, 1997). Thatched hut properties include the Hotel Bora Bora, built in 1961, the Aggie Grey's Hotel on Samoa, a resort-type complex originally built in 1942, and the Hotel Hawaiki Nui on Raiatea Island, built in 1964.

<sup>8</sup> The Oberoi Bali and the Kona Village Resort on Hawaii are examples.

<sup>9</sup> According to the official Indonesian Statistics Bureau, *Badan Pusat Statistik*, in 1998 106,000 Indonesians stayed in high-end vacation properties vs. 618,000 foreigners. Edward Tuttle architect for several Amanresorts properties that specialize in “indigenous” experiences for tourists stated in a 2000 interview that the Aman properties were favorites of wealthy Indonesians seeking escape from the urban environment of Jakarta. In Kenya, domestic tourism is slowly expanding as specialized groups, such as students, “escape” Nairobi to stay in ecolodges and visit wildlife and “traditional” tribes such as the Masai.

<sup>10</sup> The term “Tiki” was used for all types Polynesian Kitsch design popular after WWII.

<sup>11</sup> “Resort Owner Joins Little Palm Island Group.” *Miami Herald*, Tuesday, November 28, 1989, sec: KYS, p. 1B.

<sup>12</sup> This information courtesy of phone interviews with Edward DeLeon on March 16, 2001, and Marcie de la Rosa on April 3, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Edward DeLeon.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Marcie De la Rosa