Ecotourism in the architectural imagination

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Abstract

Ecotourism is a burgeoning sector of the tourism industry offering a relatively guilt-free environment in which to satisfy the desire for travel and adventure. The discourse is firmly entrenched within the dominant conception of sustainability, which posits nature as a privileged ‘other’ free from human intervention. Images of ecotourism destinations celebrate this ideology through the promotion of ‘pristine’ environments. However, a more complex image question arises in relation to the infrastructure that supports the tourists’ encounter with this idealised natural environment. This paper is concerned with unpacking the identities and ideologies that are embedded within images of ecotourism resorts and within the broader field of sustainable tourism. Through the lens of the premier global sustainable tourism certification program, Green Globe, three ‘images’ that correspond to three typologies of tourism destinations are identified. The ‘hyper-real’ is embedded within the mass-market arena of sustainable tourism, while the niche ecotourism market engages in a process of architectural ‘absence’. The third typology of place-based tourism mediates between these two extremes. While it can result in a tendency towards undifferentiated ‘background’ architecture, at its most productive it is conceived as a form of architectural ‘camouflage’ by maintaining a dynamic process of emergence and disappearance. When this typology is extended beyond the limits of the image, it offers even greater potential as a form of spatial liminality between traditional representations of human/environment relations as alternatively undifferentiated or ontologically distinct. The paper concludes by arguing that the design of ecotourism facilities should be focused on more than minimising impacts and that architecture has a productive role to play, particularly in relation to the education imperative of ecotourism.
Introduction

Despite the impacts on travel caused by the devastation of September 11, the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) showed in 2003 that tourism and travel is still the world’s leading export-earning industry (WTO 2003). It is therefore seen as an economically attractive path for developing countries (Sinclair 1998, Lanza et al 2000, Liu et al 1996). At the same time there is criticism of the negative effects of tourism on environmental, social and cultural conditions (UNEP 2003). These criticisms are reflected in a growing awareness and concern from consumers and an expressed preference to engage in “unique and culturally authentic travel experiences that protect and preserve the ecological and cultural environment” (Stueve et al 2002). Tourism is one of the key arenas in which individuals use the expression of consumption preferences as a means to construct their identity (Ateljevic et al 2002: 662-3). A variety of ‘alternative tourism’ products have emerged to fulfil this demand. As Stronza (2001: 274) argues, unlike ‘mass’ tourism these are increasingly seen as a “panacea for achieving a wide array of social, economic, and environmental goals.”

Ecotourism in particular has become a burgeoning sector of the tourism industry, offering a relatively guilt-free environment in which to satisfy the desire for travel and adventure. The exponential growth of this area since 1970 has resulted in ecotourism being hailed as the fastest growing tourism sector at the end of the century and into the new millennium (Honey et al 2002). The ecotourism area has also attracted much interest from researchers, most notably within the areas of cultural studies and geography. However, there has been very little work undertaken in relation to the built infrastructure that supports the tourist experience, particularly from within the discourse of architecture.
Lasanksy et al (2004) argue that this is a pervasive condition within the broader field of tourism. Nevertheless, this situation is only exacerbated in an arena where ‘nature’ is the primary focus of the experience. For both sustainability discourse in general, and ecotourism discourse in particular, this ‘natural’ domain is seen as something that is untouched by humans, or at least by industrialised societies (Hovardas et al 2006). Nature is thus posited as a privileged ‘other’, a separate ontological domain free from human intervention.

Nevertheless, architecture is inevitably part of any tourist experience and fundamental to the construction of meaning of place and identity. This is not to suggest that buildings can be ‘read’ like texts. As Leach (2006) argues, they are necessarily ‘prelinguistic’.

However, it forms part of the discursive space of tourism and contributes to the “culturally created spectacle” (Neumann in Lasansky 2004: 2).

This paper provides an exploration of the role of architecture in ecotourism and in the associated ‘alternative’ and ‘sustainable tourism’ genres. Through the lens of the premier international sustainable tourism accreditation system ‘Green Globe’, it explores architectural images in relation to three tourism typologies. These typologies are shown to correspond to three distinct images – hyper-real, absent and camouflage. The paper concludes by moving beyond the realm of the image to question the broader opportunities of architecture in framing a more reflexive engagement with place.

**Ecotourism and Green Globe**

Ecotourism is perhaps the best known of the ‘alternative’ tourism concepts, and has received the “lion’s share” of attention” (Stronza 2001: 274). However, there are many other related terms such as sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism, and geotourism.
While these terms have a generally common horizon of meaning and are frequently used indiscriminately, there are subtle, but nonetheless significant differences between them. For the purposes of this paper, two key points of difference need to be clarified. Firstly, ecotourism, as well as nature-based tourism and geotourism, are concerned with tourist encounters within a particular environmental and cultural context. This place focus has been challenged by Clarke (1997) who questions whether sustainable tourism is a possession or a goal; in other words, whether it can be applied to all tourism developments or whether it is dependent upon certain characteristics of the tourist destination itself. Clarke presents the various positions as a chronological progression from the precursor ‘alternative tourism’ positioned in opposition to mass tourism, to the contemporary position of ‘convergence’ where environmental and social responsibility is seen to be a goal of all tourist developments. While Clarke’s ultimate position does admit local issues as a part of its concern, it remains strongly focused on the impact of tourism operations and is less concerned with the place-based experience.

The concept of sustainable tourism is a productive initiative for the mass tourism market. However, proponents of ecotourism are still concerned to differentiate the product as essentially place-based. Ecotourism is associated with pristine, remote places that exhibit cultural and most particularly ecological difference. In fact, the International Ecotourism Standard explicitly includes a “direct personal experience of nature” as a core principle of such tourism developments (Ecotourism Australia and the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Sustainable Tourism 2004). In this way, the contemporary ecotourism movement can be seen as an extension of the eighteenth century fascination with ‘wild places’ as a source of “peculiar pleasure” (Soper 1995: 222).
Secondly, ecotourism in particular has been singled out to explicitly focus on minimising impacts to the natural environment and maximising benefits to local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996, UNEP 2002). Buckley (2003: 76) in an attempt to clarify ecotourism’s position describes it as “geotourism with a positive triple bottom line.” Geotourism is defined as “restorative and reconstructive forms of tourism that enhances a destination’s natural and cultural distinctiveness, as well as provides a high-quality visitor experience” (Stueve et al 2002: 1). However, Buckley (2003) argues that its use in practice is primarily restricted to an association with a particular geographic place. The triple bottom line component of Buckley’s definition references sustainability discourse and the goal of quantifying improvements in environmental, social and economic impacts. In this way, Buckley positions ecotourism between the emotive rhetoric of place and the pragmatic rhetoric of sustainability. For Buckley these are two very different components, the former being conceived as an ‘input’, or the components that constitute the initial tourist attraction, and the latter as an ‘output’, or the consequent benefits or costs to the social and ecological context.

The diversity of alternative tourism products is reflected in a similar diversity of organisations to support their particular agendas (see for example Beyer et al 2003 and Wink 2005). Conversely, Green Globe 21 represents an inclusive organisation that aims to assist in the development of a whole ‘sustainable travel and tourism industry’ (Green Globe website). Green Globe was originally developed by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) as a response to the imperative of Agenda 21. It was officially launched in 1994 as a membership and commitment-based program. However, following pressures
from environmentalists and NGOs, in 1999 it become an independent for-profit organisation and introduced independent auditing (Wink 2005: 12).

The program has many industry and research partners, with an international advisory council comprising members from organisations such as the UN World Tourism Organisation, the World Travel and Tourism Council and the World Conservation Union. It also maintains links to many of the active sustainability-related tourism organisations such as the Rainforest Alliance and indigenous tourism organisations such as Aboriginal Tourism Australia. These powerful partnerships, together with strong marketing, have resulted in Green Globe becoming the most widely recognised organisation within the alternative and sustainable tourism arena (Wink 2005: 12). Primarily, their objective is to provide a best-practice benchmarking and certification system, which has been described as “the world’s only truly global tourism certification program” (Koeman et al 2002: 299).

Benchmarking and certification are assessed against a series of standards comprising the Company Standard, Community Destination Standard, Precinct Planning and Design Standard and the International Ecotourism Standard (excluding Australia). Each standard sets out the required environmental and social management performance criteria for the relevant area. The Ecotourism Standard is the most extensive and is reserved for products that fit within the niche area of ecotourism. However, the Green Globe logo does not differentiate between standards or between products, so that the same logo can be applied across a diverse range of mass, small scale and ecotourism products including hotels, tour operators and activities, and transport companies and infrastructure, as well as tourist destinations themselves.
**Image and identity in the design of eco-resorts**

For the purposes of this paper, it is the built infrastructure component of Green Globe that is of interest. Primarily within Green Globe this is related to hotels, lodges and cabins, but it also includes some visitors centres. The only standards that specifically address the design of built infrastructure are the Ecotourism Standard and the Design and Construct component of the Precinct Planning and Design Standard. However, accommodation facilities can receive accreditation under the Company Standard by addressing management rather than design issues.

Even within the Ecotourism and Design and Construct Standards, the question of image and identity remains relatively obscure with criteria primarily directed at pragmatic considerations such as siting for erosion control and passive solar design. The Ecotourism Standard states that, “Architectural and landscape plans shall ensure that ecotourism buildings and infrastructure are compatible with the physical and cultural landscape” (Ecotourism Australia and the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Sustainable Tourism 2004: 9). However, there is no further explanation of what this might mean. The relationship to the image of the sustainable tourism facilities becomes more explicit in the recently released Design and Construct Standard, which states that design, should “Reflect the cultural heritage of the locality or region or native characteristics in the architectural style” (Hyde et al 2005: 45)

Evidently there is an expressed preference for a regional vernacular approach to design but there remains less clarity on the intention behind the compatibility with the ‘physical’ rather than the ‘cultural’ landscape. The conspicuous lack of information on the issue of image and identity in the design of ecotourism facilities is perhaps not surprising since
the primary focus of ecotourism is the external ‘pristine’ environment and not the cultural artefacts of those who wish to visit. As Ceballos-Lascurain argues, “the most important thing about an ecolodge is that the ecolodge is not the most important thing” (quoted in Beyer 2003: 4).

In contrast, Peace (2005: 321) proposes that the desire to visit such locations is inevitably bound up with particular aesthetic preferences:

> The promotion of ecotourism demands a higher degree of creativity than most other tourist sectors because the particularities of place have to be presumed to play a pronounced part in the choice of destination. Ecotourists, it has to be assumed, are more concerned than most about the physical and aesthetic properties of locations in which they will spend their leisure time.

Notwithstanding the focus of ecotourism on the world ‘out there’ it cannot entirely escape the demands imposed by the ‘discerning’ traveller. Furthermore, as ecotourism requires venturing into a ‘primitive’ and ‘untamed’ world as part of the ‘nature’ experience, arguably the comforts of the ‘home’ base become even more significant. Thus for Andersen, the ecolodge “should have a vibrant and engaging design that fulfils the expectation of the tourist who has come to be immersed in a unique wild setting and yet enjoys a few creature comforts at the end of the day” (Andersen 1993: 120). Andersen argues that it is the sense of “fantasy, adventure and discovery” that is absent in many ecotourism facilities (ibid). This critique is one that can be more widely applied to the entire field of green architecture, which is frequently berated for its apparent disinterest in aesthetic concerns (Wines 2000, Owen 2007a). However, for ecotourism, the quest for an appropriate aesthetic response is also driven by another imperative.
Andersen (1993) describes ecotourism facilities as a “window to the natural world.” He sees them as both emblematic of our relationship to the environment and as a “vehicle for learning and understanding” (1993: 116). Interpretation and education is one of the core tenants of ecotourism. Primarily this is focused on a didactic form of interpretation based on brochures, exhibitions and tour guides. However, the built environment offers other opportunities to engage in a more personal and reflexive form of environmental awareness. The role of architecture in contributing to this imperative is implicit in the Green Globe Design and Construct Standard which promotes the goal of “Enhancement of the “user’s” understanding and integration with the natural and social environments” before identifying the design of the ‘architectural style’ as a one of the key strategies to achieve this aim (Hyde et al 2005: 45).

There is a danger that such an agenda can be read as promoting a direct and universal experience of the world. Indeed Andersen alludes to such grand aspirations by positing that “properly designed, the ecotourism facility can become the window for human awakening to the world.” Our intentions in exploring the relationship between built infrastructure and ecotourism are not so grand. Nevertheless, following Leach (2006) we would argue that the aesthetics of architecture has a productive role to play in the construction of our identities and our understanding of our relationship to the world. It facilitates what Ockman terms a ‘politics of appearance’ where architecture “”allows something that was previously latent to become visible” (Ockman 2004: 235). However, as we shall also show, opportunities should not be limited to the realm of the image or the ‘architectural style’ but should also consider broader experiential qualities and spatial practices.
Green Globe has been selected as the source of the material for this paper since it constitutes the most widely recognised accreditation system within the sustainable and ecotourism field. As discussed above, it is an inclusive system, so products are not limited to the niche market of ecotourism, but extend to the broader field of sustainable tourism. The complete list of certified and benchmarked participants in the accommodation sector as of April 2007 formed the scope of the resorts investigated as part of this research. A brief review of all resorts was undertaken based on information provided on the Green Globe website and on the linked website to the organisation itself (if available). In particular, the content of photographic images was interrogated to explore embedded meanings and ideas concerning the role of architecture in relation to the tourist experience.

This approach has certain limitations since actual bodily experiences and spatial practices cannot be considered. However, it does enable a focus to be placed on the initial packaging and marketing of the tourist experience for consumption. These selective views of reality communicate and reinforce certain perceptions about our relationship to the environment, targeting the construction of particular identities and consumption preferences. Nevertheless, as we shall show through the example of Kandalama, for which we have extended our analysis from web images to direct experiences, the investigation of architecture and its engagement with place inevitably requires a more complex investigation.

From our analysis of the Green Globe precedents, three typologies of resorts were identified which correspond to three distinct architectural images - hyper-real, absent and
camouflage. In the remainder of the paper we will explore these architectural images in turn before making some tentative explorations that move beyond the image.

**Three ‘images’**

The overwhelming majority of participants (more than 85 percent of certified accommodation facilities) within Green Globe correspond to the typology of sustainable tourism as a form of corporate social and environmental responsibility within the mass tourism market. While the lengthy and costly process of Green Globe accreditation discourages many smaller tourism providers, for the larger hotel chains it is relatively insignificant compared with the potential ethical and business benefits. Nevertheless, the ‘green’ focus appears relatively inconsequential, being represented (if at all) by a discrete Green Globe logo in the bottom corner of the website or (even more infrequently) by a brief description of environmental responsibility embedded in the depths of the website. In direct contrast to ecotourism destinations where ‘place’ precedes ‘accommodation’, here, the destinations are predominantly a series of generic beachscapes (more than 85 percent of the sustainable tourism typology). The tourism experience is predicated on what Featherstone (1993: 182) has termed ‘home plus’, an exotic but familiar landscape of “sun, sea, sand plus ‘Viva España’ style stereotypes.” The beach location, as a liminal space between land and sea, ‘home’ and ‘away’, facilitates the shift into this world of excess (Pritchard et al 2006). Hughes (1998) identifies three forms of excess that typify the tourist experience – excess in consumption, excess in behaviour and excess in representation. Free from the ties of the everyday, the architecture can indulge in a formal ‘otherness’. Certain identities are repressed and others privileged to the extent that a form of ‘hyper-reality’ is constructed.
Various natural and cultural identities are employed. However, given the location of these resorts predominantly in generic beachside locations, formal inventiveness is not limited to ‘compatibility’ with a specific physical and cultural landscape. Even where the requirements of Green Globe accreditation stipulate such specificity within the Design and Construct Standard it appears as though a certain geographical flexibility is permissible. Thus in the Sundancer Resort, the more familiar and lush identities of Bali can be constructed on the more obscure and arid island of Lombok.

The niche ecotourism facilities are situated in direct contrast to the hyper-reality of the mass-tourism market. As the visibility of the Green Globe logo and environmental literature becomes more apparent, the architecture engages in a simultaneous act of disappearance. At the Ecoturima Kuyima in Mexico, a small collection of huts are scattered along a lagoon shore. The aerial perspective reduces their bulk so they appear almost like tidal debris. When the camera moves to a lower angle, the huts are more clearly visible, but the pictures remain grainy. Finally the camera moves inside the cabin to reveal a functional, rustic interior. A single timber post bed and patterned curtains that would not be out of place in a caravan park are the only home comforts that adorn the cabin. This is not a place to dwell, to look out at the world. To experience the landscape we must move outside the confines of the cabin to engage in it directly.

Meanwhile in the rainforest of Dominica, a small clearing in the forest is the setting for the 3 Rivers Eco Lodge. A series of cabins are scattered haphazardly throughout organic gardens. Interiors are comfortable but bland, an absent architecture represented by a view of the blank white tiled space between toilet and vanity. Again, the minimal openings to the external environment suggest that we must step outside to appreciate our
surroundings. However, in this case we are permitted to enjoy the view from the comforts of the porch – a mediating architectural device between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. These comforts of home are progressively pared back of as one moves from this tamed landscape into the forest. Here the architecture is similarly eroded to become tenuous skins of timber, bamboo, lemon grass and Verti Vert grass, barely discernable amongst the dense foliage. Only the wind turbine dares to peek above the forest canopy.

Within this privileged, ontologically distinct, natural world, architecture has no role to play. It retreats to the point of absence. The architecture is insignificant, apologetic and temporary. It can be seen as an inversion of the Bilbao effect – the architectural absence is the key to the tourist presence.

A third typology muddies the waters somewhat between these polar extremes. In the place-based model, the specific ‘natural’ environment in which the resort facilities are located is of key significance, but only in so far as it constructs a backdrop for the resort facilities themselves. It is the resort facilities, as much as the particular physical context, which becomes the driver for the tourist experience. The architecture swings between the extremes of the hyper-real and the absent, depending on the tendency to privilege either the internal or the external environment.

Towards the hyper-real end, the Coco Palm Resort and Spa is situated on a remote idyllic island in the Maldives. A mass of thatched huts congregates offshore, tethered to the beach by a timber walkway. From one perspective, they appear displaced – vernacular-inspired structures temporarily inhabiting a deserted island before unleashing their moorings and drifting off to sea. From another perspective they appear to have grown from the island – a series of branching coral heads. The interiors also shift between the
transient and the emergent – billowing curtains and timber decks give a nautical feel, while the glass-bottom Jacuzzi melts the boundaries between interior and exterior, building and nature. This is not a wilderness, but an Eden. Humans belong in this landscape and almost every picture features a couple in a warm embrace. In an image of one of the land-based villas, a couple is seen framed by arch of foliage – a mutual embrace between humans and nature.

Towards the other end, the Kandalama resort in Sri Lanka by the architect Geoffrey Bawa, at first seems to engage in a process of retreat, not so much towards absence, but towards disappearance. From the external aerial perspective the building appears almost entirely masked in its hillside setting by a continuous screen of foliage. The building itself forms a ‘cliff’ of accommodation that kinks its way around a natural rock formation. Again the architecture slips between emergence and disappearance, as it can be seen variously as growing from its environment by employing the metaphor of the cliff and being eroded by it through the metaphor of the ruin.

The external (dis)appearance of the building is an important identity, not least due to the controversy that surrounded its construction in such an ecologically and culturally sensitive environment (Bartholomeusz 1995). However, for the visitor, the more enduring experience is being on the inside looking out. A range of strategies is employed to blur the distinction between inside and outside. The main swimming pool terrace erases the middle ground causing the pool to appear to blend seamlessly with the lake beyond, while the careful placement of the private baths provides the opportunity of a more intimate experience of sinking into the lake from the comfort of your room. From every perspective the skin of the building is diminished to the extent that the building reads as a
giant open verandah. The absence of ornamentation, reflective floor surfaces and veils of
greenery all serve to further confuse the distinction between building and environment.
While the former precedent tends towards the hyper-real, and the latter towards the
absent, both engage in a process of invisibility as the boundaries between inside and
outside, between architecture and landscape, are dissolved. This is a common theme in
green architecture in general, which Crist (2007: 54) describes as “a lingering battle
between architecture’s visibility and the advancing impacts of nature.” In the more
moderate discourse of sustainability, which attempts to work within existing models of
development, the invisibility of the architecture appears as an image of negotiation
between humans and environment.
The image in place-based tourism destinations tends towards retreat - buildings sheathed
in cloaks of earth and foliage. However, this does not mean that the architecture
disappears entirely from view. As Crist (2007) argues, the process of disappearance
becomes bound up with a process of re-emergence and it is the slippery movement
between the two that is the very condition for sustainable architecture’s visibility. Leach
(2006) describes this as a form of ‘camouflage’. By camouflage, Leach does not intend
an undifferentiated approach to place, which, he argues, can lead to an “uncritical
absorption into the other”, or in the case of ecotourism, an uncritical absorption with
‘nature’ (Leach 2006: 245). Rather, camouflage is seen as a process of both identification
and differentiation, of concealing and revealing, as a condition of the necessarily dynamic
process by which we relate to the world.
Beyond the image

The question of imagery within the field of green architecture remains contentious (Owen 2007a). Sustainability cannot be made ‘visible’ by identifying a universally identifiable style and indeed as Crist (2007) concludes, any such effort is likely to result in its disappearance. However, it is similarly dangerous to explore the image alone in relation to architecture, which is inevitably concerned with the broader bodily experiences of place.

In the case of Kandalama, it is the contrast of the clarity of the spatial organisation that is the most striking feature of this resort, and underlies its ‘visibility’. The ‘cliff’ of accommodation wraps, but remains physically separate from, the rock face while simultaneously denying its connection with the ground. With the obvious exception of the hotel entrance, it is relatively difficult to gain access to the outside. Only a pool terrace extending from the main foyer level invites one to venture beyond the boundaries of the ‘cliff’. It has been described as an ocean liner (Robson 2002). On board, the visitor is part of, yet separated from the external environment. To fully interact with the outside world, the visitor must disembark – an experience that is heightened spatially by the tunnel-like quality of the entrance.

Kandalama can be seen as a liminal space both physically and metaphorically. Physically, it adopts the architectural strategy of the verandah, the threshold space between inside and outside, and between public and private. Metaphorically it becomes a threshold between two realities – the familiar internal world and the external world ‘out there’.

Pritchard et al (2006) describe all hotels as a form of liminal space in that they facilitate this negotiation between ‘home’ and ‘away’, from the ‘known’ to the ‘unknown’. Such
spaces, together with their common location on the similarly liminal space of the beach, facilitate the suspension of ‘normal rules and conventions’ and indulgence in the excesses that typify tourist experiences (Pritchard et al 2006). However, such liminal spaces and their ‘out of normal’ experience also offer the opportunity of a more reflexive engagement with place. More specifically for ecotourism, they provide a framing for a questioning of human/environment relationships.

In the case of Kandalama, the visitor is not displaced to a strange ‘other’ world as in the hyper-real resort, or distanced from the privileged natural realm as an observer hidden in the foliage. However, Kandalama also resists the undifferentiated approach of an idealised second nature common to the third typology of place-based tourism resorts. It maintains a certain ambiguity and an unwillingness to entirely dissolve the boundary between culture and nature. Rather, Kandalama sustains what Ockman (2004: 233) has described as an ‘edge condition’, or a continuous “oscillation between the ontologies of architecture and landscape.” It does so, not only through its visual identity, through a negotiation between emergence and disappearance, but more particularly through the contrast between the visual and the spatial realm, where one is simultaneously part of and distanced from the external environment.

Conclusion
This paper has been concerned with the question of image and identity in the design of ecotourism resorts. To provide a broader context, ecotourism was situated within the more expansive field of sustainable tourism and specifically within the inclusive framework of the Green Globe certification system. Ecotourism has been differentiated as a niche market that is identified both with a particular place (the input) and with
preservation and conservation of the social, cultural and ecological context (the output). In contrast, the mass-market agenda of sustainable tourism is concerned with minimising impacts, but is non place-specific. A third typology within Green Globe was identified that mediates between these two extremes. While particular exemplars could be situated either within ecotourism or within the mass market of sustainable tourism depending on whether they privilege the internal or the external environment, from the perspective of the tourist, it is the ‘natural setting’ rather than the ‘direct experience of nature’ that is primary. Thus, the focus in these resorts tends towards the inside looking out.

These three typologies have been associated with three distinct images. The hyper-real of the sustainable tourism typology corresponds to the excess in representation of the mass-tourism market. Conversely, within the niche market of ecotourism, the role of architecture is peripheral. It is conceived only in relation to the output side of the equation. Thus, it is limited to minimising impact with the goal of reducing the footprint to the point of absence. The third typology also engages in a form of disappearance, as a means of ‘blending in’ with its environment. While this can tend towards an undifferentiated ‘background’ architecture, at its most productive it has been conceived as a form of architectural camouflage by maintaining a dynamic process of emergence and disappearance, of concealing and revealing. When this typology is extended beyond the limits of the image, it offers even greater potential as a form of spatial liminality between traditional representations of human/environment relations as alternatively undifferentiated or ontologically distinct.

This is only a preliminary exploration of the role of architecture in the context of ecotourism. The argument is centred on the premise that the design of resort facilities
should be focused on more than just minimising impacts. Architecture has a productive role to play, particularly in relation to the education imperative of ecotourism. Thus, we argue that architecture should be conceived as both an input and an output, as part of the components that constitute the initial tourist attraction as well as part of the accounting of net benefits and (in the case of buildings) costs to the social and ecological context.

Despite education and awareness being a core tenant of ecotourism, very little research has been undertaken on the impacts of ecotourism on tourists (Stronza 2001: 277). Furthermore, within the broader field of tourism there are few empirical studies that address the relationship between hotel facilities and their interpretation by tourists (Pritchard et al 2006: 770). Thus the area of interpretation and construction of meaning in the design of built infrastructure offers an as yet unrealised opportunity for ecotourism.

While the ‘low impact’ approach promoted within ecotourism discourse is not in itself problematic, it misses the opportunity of engaging in a more constructive relationship with place. For architecture, as for tourism, it also offers the opportunity of moving beyond the limitations of sustainability discourse based on minimal impacts to a more positive ‘regenerative’ agenda (Lyle 1994, Moore 2001, Owen 2007b). Architecture might not be able ‘save’ the environment, but as both a product and a condition of our relationship to the world it can also not be ignored.

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Title:
Ecotourism in the architectural imagination

Date:
2007

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34851

File Description:
Ecotourism in the architectural imagination

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