Zbigniew Bromberek

ECO-RESORTS
PLANNING AND DESIGN FOR THE TROPICS
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At the time of writing this book society faces a looming problem of global warming, seen by many as the consequence of ignoring warning signs over many years of industrialisation. It appears that emissions of carbon dioxide and other civilisation by-products into the atmosphere have added to other factors with disastrous effect for the entire world. In truth, the signs of global warming have come upon us more quickly than even the pessimists could have predicted. Yet, we do not actually know what causes global warming – we can at best take an educated guess. The fact remains, though, that global warming is a reality.

In our field of architecture, we could be contributing to the environmental problems facing the planet more than others. We have known for many years that we should be paying greater heed to the way we design and construct, so that the resultant impact on the environment is minimal. Building is an irreversible activity, leaving – directly and indirectly – a permanent mark on the Earth. Yet we choose simplistic solutions to complex problems and we let economic imperatives override any pricking of the conscience that our current design practices might be generating. With the new awareness of the world that we are gaining through intensive scientific studies, we have a duty to understand the ramifications of what we are doing.

We are part of the world – an important part, yes, but only a part. Most of our present-day efforts to achieve ‘sustainability’, as I see them, are anthropocentric and inherently flawed. They are a highly tangible manifestation of our interference with systems we know very little about. At the moment, we apply our limited knowledge to preserve what we believe is worth having – according to our own priorities, presumed importance or perceived needs. There is something fundamentally wrong with even a mere suggestion that we improve the world.

Indeed, the very notion of ‘improving’ the world seems bizarre: improving it for whom or for what? Unless, that is, we are prepared to openly admit that we are not doing it for the world in its entirety, but for ourselves and ourselves only – in our selfish and egocentric pursuit of our current convictions. Nothing more and nothing less...

This book is about planning and design in one of the most fragile environments on Earth: the tropics. It does not offer, least prescribe, solutions that would deliver a sustainable outcome. Nevertheless, it does invite using caution to protect what remains unchanged and to build in a way that makes as little impact as possible. It asks you to make good use of existing local resources before reaching for more of them, further away from the places of their use. It also argues that we should take only what we really need from this environment, leaving the rest untouched. Inherent in eco-tourism is the paradox of drawing on pristine environments and thus causing the inevitable loss of their principal quality: their unspoilt purity.

I would like to see all eco-resort developers in the tropics tread lightly, eco-resort operators and users to scale down their demands and adapt to the conditions, and eco-resort planners and designers to utilise the acquired knowledge in drafting their responses to the tropical setting. I would advocate a broad use of the precautionary principle: a process in which we weigh up the long-term consequences of our actions, refraining from, or at least limiting, activities that may cause irreversible change. We must proceed cautiously because, even with the best intentions, it is possible that actions we take now, well-informed as they may now seem to be, may in future turn out to be deleterious to the environment. Together, using this respectful and considerate approach, we can save the beauty and diversity of the tropics for ourselves and for the generations to come.

Zbigniew Bromberek
No work of this kind can be done in solitude. I am grateful to all of those who were helpful during the process of working on this manuscript.

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The world’s tropical zone extends to approximately 4000 km north and 3500 km south of the equator and covers one third of the Earth’s land surface: in total it takes in over 50 million square kilometres. Globally, the tropical lands have a coastline of over 60,000 kilometres attracting millions of tourists every year with these numbers rising dramatically in recent times. Consequently, more tourist and recreational infrastructure in the tropics is increasingly needed and tourist resorts have started moving also into previously undeveloped areas.

Meanwhile, up until the 1980s, the emphasis of any tourist development in the tropics was on primary resources, such as the beach and the sea; the contribution which accommodation can make to successful holidays was neglected. This situation has obviously changed. Facilities built for tourists have to be designed to cope with the climatic stress of the tropics yet must provide a lifestyle compatible with tourists’ requirements, and do it in the most economical way. Furthermore, although a vast majority of the travellers come from developed countries, most tourist-attracting tropical areas are in developing countries of the third world.

This dichotomy causes or contributes to many undesirable phenomena that follow tourism developments in such regions. And yet, many of them seem easily avoidable by correct interpretation of, and response to, the visitors’ expectations. Ever increasing portions amongst them are tourists who want to get closer to the nature and culture of the region whilst at the same time being conscious of the need to preserve what is left of it. This desire gave rise to the eco-tourism movement more than 30 years ago. Today eco-tourism is coming of age, being the fastest growing segment of the tourist industry. Our environmental concerns are more and more often reflected in choices that we make about the way we spend our holidays. Eco-tourism is an expression of this trend.

The events surrounding the last of a three-decade long series of nuclear tests in French Polynesia clearly demonstrated a heightened environmental awareness in the region and in the world. In Australia, an attempt to develop a resort in an environmentally sensitive area of the Whitsunday Passage met with a similar reaction of concern from the public. These stories are repeated around the tropical world, from Yucatan to Borneo and from the Bahamas to the Amazon basin. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that developments, and tourist developments in particular, in all sensitive environments will be stopped or prevented. In some of them, and eventually in most of them, tourist infrastructure will be developed. This will, most certainly, be followed by unavoidable impacts, which these establishments will make, on the environment. It is up to resort planners, designers and operators to make such impacts the least possible or, at the very minimum, the least damaging.

It is said that architecture reflects needs, desires, customs, attitudes and aspirations present in society. There are then a number of reasons for which eco-tourist resorts should display an environment-friendly attitude. An efficient passive climate control, providing indoor environmental comfort in the resort, could effectively propagate solutions based broadly on non-powered passive techniques. Many tourists, and certainly the vast majority of eco-tourists, would be happy to try to adjust to the given climate conditions at the holiday destination they have chosen. It is not true that the tropical climate is unbearable. It is equally not true that passive architecture cannot cope with the conditions found in the tropics. Passive climate control will not secure constant low temperature as powered air-conditioning can do. However, the need for constant temperature is at least questionable. Adaptation is apparently much healthier than desperate efforts to insulate the building and its occupants from climatic impacts. It is also much healthier and more sustainable. Much more can also be done to integrate tourist developments with the cultural heritage of their hosting regions, their customs and social fabric.

New trends in global tourism require that tourism developers in the tropics take an environmentally conscious stance if they do not want to undermine the base on which they operate. Developers of tropical resorts have to meet the demand to accommodate growing flows of people who arrive there with quite specific expectations. An important, if not rather obvious, observation to be made is that tourists go to a resort for leisure. They try to break away from their everyday work, everyday life and everyday environment. Tourists tend to contrast everything left behind with the time spent in the resort. Part of the holiday excitement is derived from experiencing the tropics indeed, the tropics as they really are, hot,
often humid, and sometimes rainy as well. The provided accommodation should make that experience possible at a somewhat comfortable level – home levels of comfort are seldom required. Another obvious but often-overlooked fact is that visitors are very different from the local residents. Their expectations are driving their perceptions and have the ability of modifying them to a large extent. This fact could and should be utilised in the resort plan and design to work with the environment rather than against it.