**Morphologic Patterns of Resort Evolution along the Gulf of Mexico**

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Abstract

Coastal resorts around the Gulf of Mexico exhibit great variability in urban morphology. Although physical geography may partly explain regional variations, cultural-historical factors are of greater importance. Changes in urban morphologies may be correlated with development stages in conceptual models of resort evolution. Such models serve to explain historical trends, present variations, and future development conflicts.

Key words: coastal resorts, Gulf of Mexico, historic tourism, urban morphology

Introduction: Modeling Resort Evolution

Seaside resorts have been studied in terms of both historical evolution and urban form (morphology), but few studies have integrated these two research approaches. Since seaside recreation is an element of popular culture, it should follow that the component parts of resorts reflect the dictates of prevailing fashions — perhaps limited by technological constraints — at the time of development. Thus resort evolution is hypothesized to entail sequential stacking of popular culture overlays upon the seaside landscape. Many, if not most, of the elements of historical popular culture are ephemeral and last only until they are replaced by the next fad. More substantial material elements, however, such as fishing piers, boardwalks and ornate beach hotels, may persist in the landscape because of enduring popularity, or simple durability, despite being out of style. Thus, there is an unevenness to the evolving morphology of seaside resorts that involves the more structural components of coastal recreation along with the faddish artifacts that quickly come and go.
Seaside resorts, can be viewed as complexes of popular culture artifacts. As such, they undergo “life-cycles” not unlike new products introduced into the popular culture marketplace, such as slinkies, pet rocks, Cabbage Patch dolls, Batman T-shirts, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle paraphernalia. In marketing, whether it is for new products or tourist destinations, this “product life cycle” takes on a bell-shaped curve. Although the evolutionary nature of resorts has been recognized for several decades (Christaller 1963; Gilbert 1939; 1949; Wolfe 1952; 1962), it was not until Butler (1980) proposed his own S-curve adaptation of the product life cycle that a useful theoretical framework for understanding resort development was provided. Imbedded in the Butler model, as in the product life cycle model, is an implied upper limit to growth. In terms of resort development, this invokes the quantifiably elusive concept of carrying capacity.

In turn, the evolution of urban resort morphology is dependent upon several variables, including time, environment (sustainability of the physical resource base), and popular culture (evolving preferences of material culture and sustainability of the cultural resource base).

The urban morphology of tourist destinations has long been recognized as distinctive when compared with other urban types (Gilbert 1939, Jones 1933, Wolfe 1952). Land use zoning at seaside resorts was not systematically modelled until Barrett's (1958) comprehensive work on coastal resorts of the United Kingdom. Barrett's model of “theoretical accommodation zones” (fig. 1) identified a zone of “frontal amenities” in which tourists and tourist facilities congregate. With distance from the central beachfront, the intensity of tourism-related activities decreases. Stansfield (1971), comparing English and northeast U.S. resorts, found a similar pattern and identified a “recreational business district” (RBD), which has become an integral component of subsequent models (Lavery 1971) and case studies (Pigram 1977, Taylor 1975) of resort morphology.

In an effort to incorporate the cultural-historical component into morphological aspects of coastal development, both conceptual as well as morphological models of resort evolution were devised (figs. 2 and 3). These models, based upon research at eight tourist destinations around the entire Gulf of Mexico (fig. 4) (Meyer-Arendt 1987), are particularly applicable to the longer-settled (and recreationally-developed) central Gulf Coast. At least four stages of resort evolution are identified: exploration, infrastructural development, settlement expansion, and maturation (see fig. 2). If levels of recreational demand remain high enough to warrant higher density development, a fifth stage — land use intensification — may be entered prior to reaching carrying capacity. Although some resorts became infrastructurally developed earlier than others, the latter stages of expansion, maturation, and land use intensification all took place in the post-World War II era and closely coincided. In terms of material popular culture and resort morphology, we must look at the landscape impacts of the boom periods.

![Fig. 1. Theoretical accommodation zones in a seaside resort. (Barrett 1958)](image1)

![Fig. 2. A theoretical model of resort evolution.](image2)
Exploration

Before the Civil War, the Gulf Coast urban elites began to establish summer residences and frequent lodging facilities along nearby sheltered shorelines. This was in response to the popularization of swimming, bathing, and "taking in" sea breezes, and facilitated by the onset of rail and steamship transportation. New Orleanians seasonally migrated to the shores of Mississippi Sound and Lake Pontchartrain (Sullivan 1988). Mississippians preferred the eastern shore of Mobile Bay and Houstonians were drawn to Galveston Bay. With few exceptions, the wave-washed, hurricane-prone coast of the Gulf of Mexico was generally avoided by all but the "explorer" class (Cohen 1972) of summer recreationists during this period. The infrastructural development stage, in which recreation-seekers were drawn to the coast for reasons of health or pleasure, was postponed on the open Gulf until after the Civil War. Access was provided by steamship or railroad, and a central tourist focus was usually provided in the form of a hotel or dance pavilion built by speculative entrepreneurs. In cases where pre-existing fishing or port towns antedate recreational discovery of the beachfront, the patterns remain essentially similar because the initial settlement focus of these towns (e.g. Tecolutla, Galveston, Grand Isle, and Dauphin Island) was away from the beach. The initial locus of recreation was at the point on the beach closest to the core of the pre-existing settlement.

Infrastructural Development

The tourism potential of an area was quickly recognized by patterns established in the exploration stage, and infrastructural development soon fol-
Tourist-oriented businesses and lodging facilities were opened, and bridge or causeway linkages to the beach were built. A typical pattern is for an entrepreneur (one or more individuals, corporations, or even local governments) to acquire a chunk of real estate, construct a commercial enterprise such as a combination hotel-restaurant—perhaps with bathhouses and/or a fishing pier—and plat out a vacation home subdivision. This speculative activity is often initiated prior to easy access and followed by privately-funded highway and/or bridge construction. With provision of highway access, an RBD replete with one or perhaps two beach hotels becomes morphologically defined about the point of closest beach access, and subsequent commercial clustering leads to its gradual enlargement (fig. 5). Commercial establishments also begin to line the beach access highway, and summer cottages are built along the shorefront extending outward from the RBD. Beach subdivisions, although platted, exhibit little actual development in this stage. Geologically unstable and physically less desirable property (e.g. shorelines near tidal inlets, backbarrier wetlands) also remain relatively undisturbed during this early development stage.

Settlement Expansion

Once the seeds of infrastructure have been planted, settlement expansion can take place. This completes the transformation from a landscape little impacted by human activity to a complete recreational landscape. All land use zones experience growth during the expansion phase, particularly the RBD, strip commercial areas along the access and beach highways, and the residential zones. Along the beachfront, the RBD zone expands laterally from its original core as more hotels, motels, and recreation-oriented businesses are constructed (fig. 6). The remainder of the beachfront, save perhaps for less stable inlet-flanking beaches and overwash zones, becomes filled in with summer homes. The better-drained central sections of the resort area, site of the initial subdivision plats, are subject to extensive vacation home construction. The dredging and filling of wetlands increases, especially if little property remains available for development in other zones of the island, and demand for private boat docking facilities is high.

Very discrete zones of land use characterize this stage of resort evolution: 1) the RBD is the zone of the concentration of most recreation businesses and lodging facilities; 2) additional commercial development flanks the approach highway, the distal ends of the RBD, and perhaps
strips along the beach highway; and 3) vacation housing, both beach- and backbay-oriented, comprises the remainder of resort development. As the land suitable for development is filled, the settlement expansion phase is complete and resort growth levels off into a stage of maturation.

Land use Intensification

Residential development in resorts dating to the 1960s or before consisted almost exclusively of detached single-family units, but since about 1970 multi-unit structures, including townhouses and condominiums, have become more prevalent. If more intensive, i.e. high-rise, forms of land use become adopted during the active settlement expansion stage, the number of potential housing units per unit area will increase. The varying degrees of land use intensification do not constitute a requisite stage of resort evolution, but rather reflect a high sustained recreational demand (either real or perceived by developers), which in turn will modify the pre-existing resort morphology.

Land use intensification can occur by means of two primary mechanisms: 1) the introduction of higher density forms of land use during the active settlement expansion phase, which has the effect of continually raising the theoretical carrying capacity, prolonging the settlement expansion stage, and thereby delaying onset of the maturation stage; or 2) "redevelopment," in which a pre-existing form of land use is replaced by one of higher density. The first mechanism is reflected in the landscape by condominiums and multi-unit structures occupying distal beachfront zones and remaining undeveloped wetlands (fig. 7). Although state and federal legislation in the United States placed increasing restrictions on development in wetlands beginning in the 1970s, condominium developers nonetheless are still able to placate regulatory agencies by various means (such as leaving a strip of wetlands at the land-water interface).

Contemporary with the multi-unit construction in the formerly less desirable sectors of the island, pressures for redevelopment of older (and prime) real estate mount. Older commercial structures and beachfront cottages become replaced by high-rise hotels and condominiums as rising property taxes force cottage owners to sell to developers who then consolidate small properties and lobby for variances to existing zoning laws. Land use intensification can also be stimulated by destructive hurricanes which instantly remove older, low-density forms of land use (e.g. beach cottages) and subsequently facilitate the transfer of property to such high-rise developers. The net result is that severe storms may increase levels of recreational development rather than decrease them. Hurricane Frederic in 1979 stimulated such redevelopment at Gulf Shores, Alabama, for example.

The two mechanisms of land use intensification lead to two differing morphologic responses in the landscape. The first, whereby land use intensification is a continuation of the settlement expansion process, continues the pattern of discrete land use zonation already established. The redevelopment mechanism, however, leads to a hodge-podge of land uses that often stimulates public protests against continued development. In theory, the process of redevelopment may continue until only multi-unit structures occupy the island, but increasing public opposition to destruction of an earlier, idyllic resort landscape coupled with federal and state wetlands preservation efforts often result in legislation limiting the amount of further development. Such legislation both defines an arbitrary carrying capacity for the specific resort and also freezes in situ the rampant morphologic transformations so characteristic of the land use intensification stage. Thus, vestiges of relict resort landscapes are often preserved amongst the towering symbols of modern resort landscapes.

Maturation

In the proposed final stage of resort evolution, a level of maturation is reached. All potentially developable land has been developed, either low-density or high-density, and equilibrium conditions have been reached.
Except perhaps for replacement construction, no new construction is taking place, and levels of visitation by recreationists and tourists have stabilized.

The development level at which maturation sets in depends upon a variety of factors including market demand, land use regulation, and environmental regulation. Assuming sustained market demand, areal expansion will continue until political or physical growth boundaries are reached. Even less suitable micro-environments such as wetlands and unstable shorelines bordering tidal inlets are subject to development if sufficient demand exists and no prohibitive laws have yet been implemented. A low-demand resort such as Grand Isle (fig. 8) has reached the maturation stage prior to extensive wetland modification or land use intensification, while Fort Myers Beach has reached that level prematurely because wetlands and zoning legislation abruptly halted active land use intensification processes (fig. 9).

Applicability of the Resort Morphology Model

Although the proposed resort morphology model does not adequately model the new, self-contained resort complexes, it is useful in documenting the evolution of established resorts and predicting uncontrolled future courses of evolution. If a particular resort exhibits sustained recreational demand, as in southern Florida, then all development stages can be expected to occur. Planning agencies must then decide at what level of land use intensification resort development should be slowed. By setting an arbitrary cap on levels of development and levels of tourism, a resort can be steered into a maturation level both profitable for vested interests and still appealing to tourists and recreationists. Sanibel Island, Florida, may be a good example of this process.

In a more historical sense, the Gulf of Mexico resorts examined in this study fit the S-curve conceptual model on the basis of their individual morphologies coupled with growth-visititation data (fig. 9). The two Mexican resort areas (Tecolutla, Veracruz, and Progreso, Yucatán) are still in a settlement expansion stage. Since 1987, high-rise hotel construction has begun near Progreso, thereby launching resort evolution into the land use intensification stage. In spite of a poor Mexican economy, recreational demand by a Mérida hinterland is still increasing. The two Texas resorts are in a land use intensification stage, but more as part of the latter settlement

Fig. 8. Grand Isle, a low-intensity, mature resort. Note beach nourishment project in progress in 1984.

Fig. 9. Stage of resort development at the study sites. (see Fig. 3 for key)
expansion stage. Both Galveston Island and South Padre Island still have sufficient space into which to expand, and visitation levels are still increasing. But whether market demand exists to occupy the Texas-size supply of high-rises is questionable, especially at remote South Padre Island (fig. 10). The two Florida resorts are at maturation levels, but at differing levels of land use intensity. The maturation level at Fort Myers Beach has now been arbitrarily frozen, and at Pensacola Beach, residents and planning authorities are grappling with deciding at what levels to freeze development. Grand Isle and Dauphin Island have both suffered from negative environmental images, and the resulting low recreational demand has led the two resorts into a low-density maturation level.

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Fig. 10. South Padre Island, a high-intensity resort with much vacant space for potential expansion.

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