Recreational Business Districts in Gulf of Mexico Seaside Resorts

Klaus J. Meyer-Arendt

ABSTRACT. Within the body of literature addressing tourism imprints upon the cultural landscape, the recreational business district (RBD) has been identified as a key component of a resort area, and the seaside has been no exception. Comprised of tourist-oriented businesses and historically focused upon the beach, incipient RBDs evolved at seaside termini of railroads, highways, and footpaths. Construction of bathhouses, casinos or beach hotels at these sites was followed by nearby clustering of secondary and tertiary recreational enterprises. Lateral expansion of coastal roads often led to RBD elongation, but RBD core areas usually remained as the central focus of tourist activity. Variations in RBD development have resulted from shifts in beach access corridors and/or 'redevelopment' of older resort landscapes. Along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, the RBD persists as an artifact of the touristic landscape.

If cultural landscapes evolve as a result of human activity, then those landscapes must reflect many of the cultural predilections of the humans inhabiting those landscapes. Culture traits such as food habits, belief systems, and social organization are expressed in the rural and urban landscapes of the world ecumene, and the identification of spatial variations in cultural landscapes has been a popular research activity among cultural geographers.1 Although most traditional studies were focused upon folk culture and its landscape expressions, geographers and other social scientists have by and large ignored the imprint of popular culture which is rapidly overlaying a new “landscape layer” on a large portion of the late 20th-century world. Recreation and tourism, as components of popular culture, have been responsible for shaping and reshaping much of the earth’s surface, and even the term “tourism landscape” conjures up visions of resort hotels, sports activities, and vibrant nightlife in the eyes of many. However, the study of culture reflected in tourism landscapes is a very broad subject, and one that geographers have been rather negligent in pursuing.2
One aspect of the tourism landscape that has received attention is resort morphology. For at least six decades, geographers have noted the specialized urban forms and morphologic components of resort areas. A more recently labeled component of resort morphology—the *recreational business district* (RBD)—has now found its way into the mainstream of resort area studies. It is the aim of this study to trace the origins of the RBD as an aspect of resort morphology and to evaluate the role of RBDs in the evolution of Gulf Coast seaside resorts.

**Seaside Resort Morphology**

It has been long recognized that resort settlements develop a unique form because of their specialized touristic/recreational functions.\(^3\) Integral components of a resort’s morphology include lodging facilities and a zone of businesses catering to the tourists/recreationists. Locational aspects of such morphologic components depend upon some combination of type of tourism attraction and physical constraints of the site.\(^4\) At coastal resorts, the historic attraction has been the beach and surf zone, and tourist structures reached their greatest density along the beachfront. This shorefront agglomeration of recreational facilities was noted by E.W. Gilbert at Brighton and several other British seaside resorts in the 1930s and 1940s, but no attempts at delineating specific urban sectors within these resorts were made.\(^5\) Roy Wolfe, in a 1952 study of Wasaga Beach, Ontario, did identify discrete zones of tourism activity, and he identified a central *honky-tonk* in addition to zones of residential housing and accommodation facilities.\(^6\) J.A. Barrett, in a comprehensive analysis of 80 seaside resorts in the United Kingdom, noted the linearity and also the functional and socio-economic distinctiveness of a similar zone that he labelled *frontal amenities*.\(^7\) His model of *theoretical accommodation zones* is perhaps the first conceptual morphological model of “recreational” land-use zonation at seaside resorts (Fig. 1).
Charles Stansfield, in a 1969 study of economic land-use sectors of Ocean City, New Jersey, proposed the concept of a recreational business district. The RBD was distinguished from the central business district (CBD) in form, function, and location. While the CBD offered a complete range of retail goods and services and was centrally located respective to permanent residents, the RBD was located proximate to the primary focus of tourist attention and with maximum accessibility to lodging facilities and travel routes. Businesses found in the RBD were categorized into four principal types: 1) food and beverage concerns, 2) gift-novelty variety stores, 3) candy, nut, and confectionary stores, and 4) commercial amusements and theaters. Lodging facilities were listed separately, although both hotels and the RBD shared a shorefront orientation. Follow-up studies of resort evolution, diffusion, and land-use zonation by Stansfield further delineated RBDs at resorts along the shores of New Jersey and Great Britain (Fig. 2). Within the tourism literature, the term RBD soon replaced the earlier terms of honky-tonk and frontal amenities.

Patrick Lavery included the RBD as a land-use component in his 1971 morphologic model of a typical British seaside resort. Here the CBD and RBD, although functionally separated, adjoin each other, respectively wedged between the train depot and the fishing pier (Fig. 3). Dense commercial development lines the main streets of the core areas. Although separated from the beach by a beach highway, the hotel zone fronts the sea, and more modest lodging facilities and residences occupy concentric zones more distant from the pier. Variations in beachfront urban morphology along the French Riviera were examined by Douglas Pearce, who identified three categories of fronts de mer. Two of these showed tourist structures separated from the beach by a beach highway and/or promenade, and one placed the row of tourist development...
between the beach highway and the beach. The beach highway/promenade models have since been labelled characteristic of European resorts, while the development-on-the-beach model has come to be regarded as typical of American seaside resorts.

The RBD concept was applied and modified in several subsequent studies of beach resort morphology. In a study of land-use patterns of East London, South Africa, V. Taylor in 1975 broadened the definition of RBD to include lodging facilities such as hotels and other places of seasonal residency. Along Australia’s Gold Coast, John Pigram in 1977 noted that resort morphology closely followed the Barrett and Lavery models and that RBDs were easily recognized. A more recent morphologic analysis of beach resorts in Australia and Great Britain by Dennis Jeans proposed a “semiotic model” which, in essence, is an elaboration of the Lavery model. This author also has identified RBDs as tourism sector “core areas” in various studies documenting resort evolution around the Gulf of Mexico.

Application of RBD Models

Since the identification and subsequent confirmations of the RBD were made by examining resorts that dated to the 19th century or before, questions arose as to the validity of the RBD concept at post-Automobile Age resorts. The nodality of the British and early American RBDs was attributed in large part to the mode of transportation—either steamship or railroad—which led to a concentration of tourists at nodes, normally the beach area most proximate to the transport termini. Resultant compact RBDs in part were explained on the basis of such preconditions. Whether 20th-century resorts, founded in the aftermath of the mass production
of automobiles, supported RBDs similar to those noted by Stansfield and Lavery remained to be verified.

Inherent in Lavery's model is a resort morphology which is essentially T-shaped (Fig. 4). An incipient RBD develops at the beach closest to the point of tourist arrival, which in his case is the train station located near the edge of the CBD (Fig. 3). Hotels and recreational businesses cluster at this initial contact point with the beach, and subsequent RBD growth proceeds laterally along the beachfront. To capitalize on the high volume of tourist throughflow, retail business fill in the flanks of prime access corridor, where real estate values are high (although not as high as along the beachfront). This commercial spine, coupled with the lateral beachfront spread of tourist-oriented structures, comprises the T-shape in the model and allows a generalized RBD to take the shape of a triangle. As resorts develop, the touristic beachfront fuses with the non-touristic, pre-existing settlement into an urban complex which may or may not be dominated by a seaside tourism function.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Existing Settlement</th>
<th>No Prior Settlement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>access road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4. The T-pattern of RBD development along a seacoast.

In areas where no settlement previously had existed close to the seashore yet transportation access stimulated recreational development, it was anticipated that a similar pattern of of RBD development would take place. Even at sites developed after about 1920, it was hypothesized that the point of primary contact with the beach would form a nucleus for RBD development (Fig. 4). Subsequent tourist-oriented commercial
development would spread laterally along the beachfront and inland along the access corridor.

One of the aims of a comparative study of resorts along the Gulf of Mexico of the United States and Mexico was to see if the T-shaped model of resort morphology did indeed at least partly explain locational aspects of the respective recreational business districts. The broader study, which examined environmental as well as morphological aspects of eight seaside resorts—Fort Myers Beach and Pensacola Beach (Florida), Dauphin Island (Alabama), Grand Isle (Louisiana), Galveston and South Padre Island (Texas), Tecolutla (Veracruz, Mexico), and Progreso (Yucatán, Mexico)—was methodologically historical and relied upon existing maps, photographs, literary sources, and personal interviews for reconstruction of patterns of resort evolution (Fig. 5).[^18] A key component of resort morphology was found to be the RBD, which was defined in the study as including both recreational businesses as well as overnight lodging facilities, not just because of their symbiotic relationship, but also because hotels often preceded—and stimulated—subsequent RBD development. Preliminary results indicate that in spite of successive sequences of recreational occupancy which may have buried or reshaped earlier foci of recreational development, at most of the sites,

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[^18]: Fig. 5. Study sites around the Gulf of Mexico.
the original RBDs still constitute the cores of the present RBDs. To aid in the following discussion of RBD evolution, the morphologic patterns of resort development have been schematically diagrammed (Fig. 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grand Isle</th>
<th>Galveston</th>
<th>South Padre Island</th>
<th>Ft. Myers Beach</th>
<th>Pensacola Beach</th>
<th>Dauphin Island</th>
<th>Progreso</th>
<th>Tecolutla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>homestead</td>
<td>homestead</td>
<td>gulf</td>
<td>high dunes</td>
<td>lagoon</td>
<td>plaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>landing</td>
<td>casino</td>
<td>gulf</td>
<td>casino</td>
<td>lagoon</td>
<td>h plazza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>landing</td>
<td>gulf</td>
<td>casino</td>
<td>rbd</td>
<td>lagoon</td>
<td>rbd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>developed</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 6. RBD evolution at Gulf of Mexico seaside resorts.
Recreational urbanization along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico dates to the middle of the 19th century. This attraction to the seashore was stimulated partly by diffusion of trends already popularized in Europe and the northeastern United States, but additional variables such as proximity to urban centers, ease of accessibility, and perception of the seashore environment as both aesthetically pleasing and relatively safe from hurricane destruction were important in the siting of coastal development. Although occasional tourism at beach sites usually preceded availability of easy access to most of the sites, individual or corporate entrepreneurs, perceiving a demand for seaside tourism, soon provided infrastructural development in the form of transport and/or lodging facilities.

Pre-Automobile Patterns. Significant structural development in the late 19th century took place at three of the eight sites (Fig. 6). New Orleanians endured 8-hour steamer voyages to Grand Isle, where bathhouses, cottages, and three major hotels were built before the infamous 1893 hurricane ended this flirtation with beach recreation. Six hundred miles to the south, a henequen boom in Mexico’s Yucatán stimulated construction of a railroad to the new port of Progreso in the early 1880s. Soon an RBD comprising summer homes, hotels, and restaurants emerged along a popular beach updrift of the port facility. At about the same time, a trolley line was extended to the beach from downtown Galveston, a booming cotton-shipping port and the largest city in Texas. The trolley company erected a dance pavilion, and a focus of seaside recreation was created. Soon a major beachfront hotel was built and recreational businesses began to “cluster about the Beach Hotel like flies about a barrel of New Orleans sugar.” Although the hotel burned in 1898 and Galveston experienced a devastating hurricane in 1900, the decision was made to fortify the city. After a formidable seawall was built, a rejuvenated RBD occupied the same site as before the storm.

At other sites, including Santa Rosa Island (Pensacola Beach), Estero Island (Fort Myers Beach), and South Padre Island, lack of overland access and memories of recent devastating hurricanes precluded any significant development in the 19th century. However, increasing numbers of dayuse recreationists began to frequent the beaches. On Santa Rosa Island, bathers congregated near a life-saving station, where a small beach hotel was built in the early 1900s. Although this hotel only lasted until the next hurricane (in 1916), these early locales of popular usage generally became the sites of RBD development in subsequent years.

Impact of Automobile Access. The primary stimulus of coastal development was the provision of overland access. With the exceptions of Galveston and Progreso, founded in the railroad era, this access was in the form of highways from the mainland/interior. By the end of the...
Roaring 20s, automobile ownership and seaside recreation had become popularized, and roads were extended to numerous beaches including Fort Myers Beach, Pensacola Beach, Grand Isle, and (a decade later) Tecolutla. A T-pattern of resort development, with an RBD at the point of closest beach access (from either a pre-existing settlement or directly from the mainland), characterized these new resorts, just as it had the earlier railroad resorts. Typically, one or two central beach hotels were built at or near the point of access, as were other amusement facilities including casinos, restaurants, and bathhouses. Residential sectors were built at the distal ends of the RBD and in the resort’s interior (or backbarrier). RBDs expanded both by an increasing concentration of business enterprises in the core area and also a lateral elongation along the shorefront. This pattern is best exemplified by Fort Myers Beach, where the original RBD (locally known as “Times Square” or “honky-tonk”) remains as the present RBD core, and beach cottages once at its periphery have now become engulfed by its lateral sprawl (Fig. 7).23

Pensacola Beach was reached by highway in 1931, but due to a unique situation whereby the land was publicly-owned and only leased for recreational development, initially only an RBD—in the form of an entertainment complex (casino)—was built. Not until the 1950s did a surrounding resort infrastructure—including cottages, motels, and tourist-oriented businesses—develop, and a pattern similar to that of Fort Myers Beach was adopted (Fig. 8).24

Grand Isle did not touristically recover from the 1893 hurricane until a highway to the island was completed in 1934.25 The nodal RBD pattern became skewed here because of a pre-existing central village and changes in tourist arrival points. Most RBD activities soon clustered along the beach seaward of the village. A hotel and other businesses had been built in the vicinity of the pre-highway landing point at the east end, but a greater share of the post-highway recreational development became located at the west end, the new point of tourist arrivals. A commercial RBD strip—rather than a distinctive node—has since evolved at Grand Isle.

Galveston, highway-accessible since 1911, experienced a recreational boom in the Roaring 20s and the classic pattern of RBD elongation took place. The core of the RBD remained in its original location, occupied by several major hotels (including the famous Galvez), bathhouses, casinos, and gift/novelty shops (Fig. 9). But the seawall which has spared the city the ravages of subsequent hurricanes lost its fronting beaches to scouring and erosion, and beachgoers shifted their attentions eastward toward a sand beach. The eastward extension of Galveston’s RBD since the 1920s has been facilitated by a corollary trend of sand accretion against the east jetty (Fig. 6).
Fig. 7. The RBD of Fort Myers Beach, Florida. Source: Author, 1985.

Fig. 8. The RBD of Pensacola Beach, Florida. Source: Author, 1986.
Fig. 9. Galveston's Hotel Galvez, built in 1911. Source: Author, 1986.

Fig. 10. The art deco RBD of Tecolutla, Veracruz. Source: Author, 1985.
Tecolutla was not easily accessible to its Mexico City recreational hinterland until a highway was opened in the early 1940s. The centuries-old fishing village was fairly compact, and both the beachfront and the riverfront were essentially undeveloped. With the opening of the highway (and a ferry crossing), speculators soon built three beach hotels, and a shore-focused RBD rapidly developed. As the town slowly grew, it coalesced with a small beach subdivision just north of town, where a secondary RBD became established. However, these speculative efforts at Gulf Coast resort development were eclipsed by the development—and sustained popularity—of Acapulco on Mexico's Pacific Coast. As a result, Tecolutla's growth has been slow until the early 1980s, and its RBD still has the appearance of a 1940s art-deco beach resort (Fig. 10).26

The popularization of the automobile in the 1920s also stimulated recreational development at Progreso, and a period of summer home (casa veraniega) construction was initiated. A newly-landscaped RBD was extended along the beachfront promenade (malecón) eastward from its original core (Fig. 11). The lower land values of the more outlying Mayan fishing villages attracted slightly lower social strata of Yucatecan society, and individual nodes of recreational development developed. Today, there has been a coalescence of recreational development for about a 20-kilometer stretch of beachfront, and RBDs are located at the beaches fronting the various recreationally transformed settlements. In spite of extensive destruction to summer homes and tourist facilities by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, the post-storm patterns appear to be the same.27

South Padre Island and Dauphin Island were both platted as beach subdivisions in the 1950s, at which time the first causeways to the islands were built. However, both sites had received tourists since the beginning of the century, and at both sites incipient RBDs had evolved by the 1920s. These incipient patterns were later obscured or modified by the platting of the subdivisions.

In conjunction with an earlier recreational boom at Port Isabel, Texas (on the mainland, connected to Brownsville by train) in the 1920s, South Padre Island received increasing numbers of visitors. A plank road was laid across the island to Tarpon Beach, and a small hotel/casino and a few cottages were built. Just as the state of Texas was considering building a highway on the island, a 1933 hurricane destroyed the fledgling resort.28 This elimination of an incipient development pattern was further reinforced by the platting of the Padre Beach subdivision in the 1950s which took a much different form. In the grid subdivision, the shorefront became occupied by motels and summer homes, most of which were replaced by highrise resort complexes (essentially self-contained RBDs) in the 1980s (Fig. 12). By zoning code, secondary and tertiary businesses have become restricted to the main north-south highway two blocks inland.
Fig. 11. Progreso, Yucatán. The palm-fronted malecón is at far left. Source: Author, 1984.

Fig. 12. South Padre Island: a causeway terminus sans RBD. Source: Author, 1985.
from the shorefront. The south end of the island was deeded as a county park, and this is today the dominant attraction for local recreationists and fishermen, essentially functioning as an RBD but without the typical structural components.

Dauphin Island has been continuously settled since the first arrival of the French in 1701. However, the small settlement—composed of but a few fishing families—was oriented toward the lee side of the island, and little interest in the beach was shown until the early 20th century. In the 1920s, the island was advertised as the “Atlantic City of the South” by railway promoters, but except for occasional summer visitors from Mobile (Alabama), tourism was virtually nonexistent. A straight path was made from the village through the 50-foot-high dunes to the beach, where a modest bathhouse (“casino”) was built. But, like South Padre Island, hurricanes took their toll on the incipient RBD development, and in the 1950s the Mobile Chamber of Commerce bought and subdivided the entire island. However, unlike at South Padre Island, the RBD concept was incorporated into the subdivision plat, and a county park and adjacent RBD (“motel row”) were laid out at the west end of the high dunes. Low-quality beaches and frequent storms have kept recreational demand levels low on the island, and Hurricane Frederic in 1979 effectively reduced the RBD to foundations. At present, Dauphin Island’s post-storm RBD is quite small. At nearby Gulf Shores (Alabama), however, the same hurricane stimulated development by removing unsightly old cottages, and a new, improved classic T-shaped RBD presently occupies the site of the old.

Conclusions

Although the variables of resort development are many, the concept of a centralized RBD is valid among Gulf Coast resorts. The T-shaped model of resort morphology is useful in delineating the original RBD site at resorts formed in the railway and automobile eras. Although the automobile afforded personal mobility, the initial point of beach access usually became the locus tourist activities, and hotels and commercial enterprises were built to cater to the tourists. This RBD evolution can be schematically shown by a simple model in which: a) “explorer” tourists carve a path to the beach and perhaps construct a beach house or two; b) a subsequent causeway leads to the same tourist locus on the beach, and the classic T-shaped model develops; and c) a platted subdivision fills in with summer homes while the beachfront RBD becomes extended in both directions from its initial core (Fig. 13). Except in the case of South Padre Island, the original RBD site usually persists as the core of the modern RBD. Condominiums and high-rise resort hotels, initially restricted to more distal beachfront locations within resort towns, now threaten to modify RBD morphologies as redevelopment becomes
increasingly popular at coastal resorts. Although modernization may bring a revitalization (and tourism revenues) to a resort destination, the demise of relict RBD components will remove the keys that aid in our interpretation of the evolution of a cultural landscape.

Acknowledgments

This article has developed from a presentation originally made at the meetings of the Middle States Division of the Association of American Geographers in Atlantic City on October 9-10, 1987. I wish to thank Charles Stansfield for organizing such excellent meetings and affording me an opportunity to become acquainted with the Jersey shore, from whence so many aspects of seaside culture diffused out to the rest of the country and even the world. Portions of the material contained in the article are based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. SES-8507500.
Notes

2Architects, preservationists, and even popular writers have better track records in correlating culture with the built environment. For example, an excellent overview of Florida's turn-of-the-century, quasi-Moorish tourism landscape development is provided by David Nolan, Fifty Feet in Paradise: The Booming of Florida (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).
of Resort Evolution along the Gulf of Mexico," in *Culture, Form, and Place: Essays in Honor of Fred B. Kniffen and Robert C. West*, ed. by Kent Mathewson (Baton Rouge: Geoscience and Man series, Louisiana State University, 1991) in press.


30 Meyer-Arendt, in press.

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