

ECOTOURISM AND AUTHENTIC ECOLODGES

Reconciling the man-made and natural environments
and getting the best of both worlds

Guests of the Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica get to live in the middle of the last remaining lowland tropical rainforest of Central America (Image courtesy of Lapa Rios Ecolodge)

The tribe's knowledge of the site was instrumental in drafting the official maps used as the basis for the site plan. In 2011, the ecolodge was turned over to the Achuar people who are now operating the business on their own.

Setting before structure

An authentic ecolodge is more about the setting than it is about the structure itself. It derives its value from the biodiversity that thrives in the area that is not threatened by over-development and crowding. Maintaining such biodiversity also means integrating with the surrounding landscape and avoiding the introduction of exotic plant species which affects ecological balance. *(This issue is discussed in the article, Extinction Crisis, on pages 46-51).* This is why Mehta advocates that planning for ecolodges begin first and foremost with a metaphysical analysis of



the site. Where the concept of holism engages the five senses, metaphysical site analysis involves six—sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and *feeling*. This allows the designers a few days to “feel” the site and be “one” with the site before conducting the more objective process

Bound by DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, the Virunga Massif is home to half of the world's mountain gorilla population. It is a conflict area but the three countries pledged to work together to promote ecotourism as a means to lasting peace and stability in the area. The Sabyinyo Ecolodge is one of the ecolodges in the Virunga Massif that provides livelihood to local people. (Image courtesy of Hitesh Mehta)

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COMMUNICATION VS. INTERPRETATION

Dr. Roberto Cereno of the UP Los Baños College of Forestry & Natural Resources made a distinction between communication and interpretation. Communication simply means providing information, facts and figures, while interpretation means providing meanings. The Makiling Botanic Gardens at the northeastern slope of Mount Makiling, for example, offers both communication and interpretation. Informational boards are posted along the site's “ecotrail” providing data and facts about the animals and plants in the garden. This is communication. To help tourists understand the significance of conserving those rare and endemic flora and fauna, a group of “ecoguides” known as the Educators for Nature Tourism (ENTs) conduct tours of the area. This is interpretation.

of physical site analysis and data collection. On day three of the ecolodge planning workshop, Mehta had the participants experience the metaphysical exercise for themselves, bringing them to a garden property in the hills of Antipolo, for which they would be tasked to design an eco-friendly resort and event space. Everyone who went through the exercise said that it brought an added dimension to the design process that was to come. *(Excerpts from the participants' metaphysical site analyses on pages 40-44)*

Continuity of the vernacular

The architecture and construction of ecolodges uses locally sourced materials and labor, and adheres to the concept of continuity of the vernacular. This should not be construed as propagating replications. On the contrary, as seen in the examples presented by Mehta during the workshop, the International Ecotourism Society rejects designs that are homogenous, derivative and arbitrary.



This longitudinal section through the Kwanari Ecolodge site demonstrates the low-impact siting of the buildings which are all on stilts and accessed by boardwalks to ensure uninterrupted natural stormwater drainage. It also shows the strong natural connection between forest and sea. (Image courtesy of Hitesh Mehta)

SAMPLE SITE PLANS

The Kwanari Ecolodge Masterplan

Local consultants and the local community played an important role in the preparation of a sustainable master plan for the Kwanari Ecolodge. To ensure low-impact development, the architect and consultants agreed on a cluster-type plan with boardwalks. Individual villas are all oriented to maximize views and allow passive ventilation.



- 1 Arrival road
- 2 Guest parking
- 3 Main lodge building
- 4 Ocean villas
- 5 Forest villas
- 6 Treehouse
- 7 Wellness center
- 8 Recreation center & pool
- 9 Rock beach
- 10 Creek
- 11 Manager's house
- 12 Back of house
- 13 Organic garden



Eco-psychology Analysis: Planning for the Kwanari Ecolodge is based on the concepts of eco-psychology and deep ecology. An eco-psychologist was hired to conduct eco-psychology workshops to help the client and consultants become "one" with the site and understand the interdependence of humans and natural elements. "We want to connect people with all the things that they do that's affecting nature," says Mehta.