

Past Forward: Designing Waterfront Projects to Capture Local Authenticity

Waterfront redevelopment, often crucial in restoring cities and towns to economic and social health, can overlook the value of reinvigorating a locations beauty, cultural appeal, diversity, and sense of community. Redevelopment plans often copy models that succeeded in other cities and ignore those characteristics that make a destination most appealing - its culture, heritage, and environment.

Preservation and restoration of ecological and community assets can contribute to the creation of a destination with natural and cultural distinction one that attracts a growing population of travelers who seek authentic travel experiences. According to a 2002 Travel Industry Association of America study, more than 55 million Americans - over 1/3 of the U.S. traveling public - can be classified as "geotourists", travelers who seek places where they can interact with both the people and the natural features of a destination. Worldwide, more than 100 million geotourists embrace culture, history, and biodiversity as part of their travel experience.

These geographically savvy travelers represent a new market that can be tapped. Countries with waterfront assets are recognizing the opportunities that can be created by nurturing existing cultural and ecological resources and by satisfying the geotourists' hunger for new, authentic experiences. Presented with a vision and plan to capitalize on an areas unique attributes, some countries are adopting strategic and globally perspective approaches to redevelopment that protect and promote their inherent assets.

Working with Miami, Florida -based design/build firm Coastal Systems international, Inc., private developers and governmental agencies in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, are embarking on projects sensitive to the impact development and tourism have on local communities and lifestyles. The goal of these initiatives is to create a safe, stable, welcoming environment that benefits both travelers and local residents.

Guatemala. What began as a renewal project at two ports, Puerto Izabal and Puerto Quetzal, has evolved into a comprehensive master plan comprising projects on the Caribbean and Pacific coast and a design strategy intended to capture the essence of Guatemala's Mayan and colonial Spanish cultures. The undertaking incorporates acres of wetlands, botanical gardens, beaches, and nature preserves, merging these assets with the surrounding urban environments. The projects are designed to serve the needs of both the evolving breed of traveler and the locals in an effort to carve out some of the most authentic travel experiences in Central America.

Golfito, Costa Rica. Originally planned and built in 1935 as the headquarters for the United Fruit Company, this Pacific coastal town is being redeveloped not only to spotlight the



Frederiksted Waterfront, St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

areas ecological and cultural treasures, but also to enrich the local quality of life. The urban revitalization of Golfito focuses on sustainable tourism through the creation of a modern waterfront resort that blends into the historical architecture and legacy left by United Fruit. A new master plan for the location comprises world-class waterfront facilities including marinas, residences, hotels, and airport, and a cruise port, as well as new housing for the area's people and creation of local jobs.

Frederiksted, St. Croix. The Frederiksted port once was on many cruise lines itineraries, but the appeal of newer destinations has left the port in sharp decline. The development team, through a community design charrette, identified the waterfront town's assets - its proximity to a historical area offering unique architecture, rich cultural experiences, and extensive wildlife and ecological attractions. A plan was developed that will involve extension of the port's perimeters to establish a "path of charm" meandering along the waterfront and leading to interior points of interest. The path is intended not only to appeal to vacationers and increase awareness of St. Croix's unique heritage, but also to boost local pride and generate other economic revitalization.

These projects represent a philosophy of "engineered waterfront environments" -a holistic approach to destination development that promotes preservation and enhancement of a location's geographic, cultural, and ecological character. As countries seek sustained economic and cultural growth, they are being inspired to look at waterfront development from a perspective based on authenticity and allegiance to their past, inherit qualities, and existing offerings. For waterfront development planners, designers, engineers, and managers - as well as the people they serve - the goal is to link cultural and tourist experiences to the waterfront to fulfill both immediate and long term needs. - R. Harvey Sasso, president of Coastal Systems International, Inc.