

Identity and imagery: Shaping Tourism in the Caribbean  
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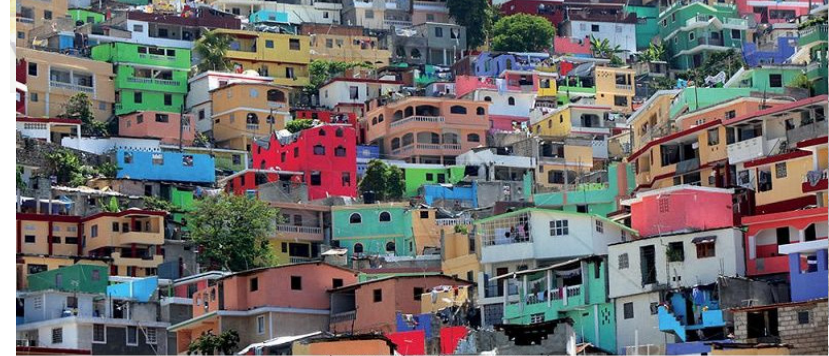


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Figure 1: Painting of the “Magnificent Seven” - Victorian Architectur in Port de Spain, Trinidad

**INTRODUCTION**

Traveling, as we know it today, is all about learning new things from the places we visit. From the food, to the music, to the cultural practices, these are all things we explore of our own free will, given the luxury of time and money. What if you lost that free will and were only allowed to explore what your home country deemed acceptable? How would you feel as a patron? How would the natives of the country you are visiting feel? How would this affect them? This was the case for many Caribbean countries in the 19th century. From the moment they gained independence, Caribbean countries, and the Caribbean picturesque, were partially controlled by the governing country it freed itself from. As photography was on the rise, images were fostered to paint only what governing countries wanted consumers to see. Buildings were designed to resemble that of those governing countries. The identity of these Caribbean countries was no longer being conveyed correctly, they were being photoshopped and misconstrued. In this essay I will examine the identity of the Caribbean – the people, the culture, and the architecture – and the role imagery played in shaping the tourism industry, pertaining to the land, the people, and the architecture.

**IDENTITY**

CULTURE

Ripped from their homelands, Africans – now black Caribbeans – were brought to these islands as slaves. In a strange nation with foreign individuals, they created their own languages, cultural practices, and expressions. Cultural expression was critical to the survival of black Caribbeans, it allowed them to communicate with each other – although originally from different African tribes/nations. The culture of the Caribbean was not created on the basis of black caribbean experiences alone. Practices as well as dialects from their governing world nations had a hand in each islands’ cultural development. For example, soup joumou, squash soup, was a delicacy – prepared by slaves – that was reserved for French colonial masters and plantation owners. Upon gaining their independence in 1804, Haitians began partaking in that delicacy. Soup joumou is now a traditional meal served on the day that commemorates Haiti’s liberation from French rule, January 1st. Similarly, the language Haitian creole has many words that sound similar to French as well as Spanish words, sometimes they even share the same meaning. Religion was another aspect brought into the caribbean. Many churches were started by Europeans before and after emancipation. Influenced by the culture around them, Africans – now black caribbeans – were able to assimilate, while also setting themselves apart from their colonizing counterparts.



Figure 2: Traditional Congo dance in Portebello. Afro-colonial dance with Spanish influences



Figure 3: Hindu Temples of the Caribbean, Guyana

## ARCHITECTURE

Throughout the rich legacy of Caribbean architecture, colonial architecture dominates, but that is in no part due to local styles and tradition. Although climate played a role in all architectural fashions across the Caribbean, building styles varied between the islands based on their former parent country. For example:

“Larger, Spanish-speaking islands, such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba possess a strong heritage of religious, institutional and residential buildings built of masonry and rooted in the classical architectural language of the Mediterranean... The French islands, such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, have a composite architectural legacy, infused with distinctively French architectural fashions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; mansard roofs and decorative quoins, for example, are common in Fort de France and in Pointe-à-Pitre. The English islands, Jamaica and Barbados, and many eastern Caribbean islands have a profusion of Palladian- inspired homes and governmental and institutional buildings - they are largely symmetrical with pediments, columns and rusticated cut masonry walls, Wood construction, sometimes combined with masonry, also is found on these islands; cities like Kingston (in Jamaica) and St. John’s (in Antigua) display a cohesive range of neoclassical informed buildings and smaller cottages derived from them”<sup>1</sup>

The Caribbean never truly established a strong historical architectural style of its own partly due to the recurring destruction and reconstruction as a result of storms and natural disasters. It may also be in part due to the historical association of traditional



Figure 4: Colonial Architecture in Nassau, Bahamas

architecture with colonialism. Outside of these influences, the true gems of the Caribbean lied in the minor details. Across the islands, verandahs, porches, windows, staircases, orientations, and ornamentation set them apart, not only from each other, but from the rest of the world.



**Banyan — Tree, Kingston Park**

Figure 5: Banyan Tree in Kingston Jamaica (photography by Duperly and Sons)

## IMAGERY

### LANDSCAPE

What started off as a small-scale industry, generally enjoyed only by the wealthy upper class, Tourism grew into a booming international business enjoyed by all classes, supporting small countries all over the world. In the 1850s, following the emancipation of Caribbean countries, tourism began to inch its way into the economy. By this time, photography had been developed and was beginning to make the world feel like a smaller place. “If, as photography historian Alan Trachtenberg postulates, ‘historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability,’ what impact would photography’s development at the end of slavery have on the production of history in the African diaspora?”<sup>2</sup> This excerpt is referring to the documentation/storytelling and false narratives that could potentially arise – pertaining to the history of slavery – in the absence of photography. Contrary to what people may believe of photography, before photoshop was a thing, this same question can also be asked of the perception of the present moment. What impact would the development of photography have on the framing of the tourist gaze?

Taking a quick look at Jamaica during the late nineteenth century, supporters of the tourism industry aimed to create a new image of Jamaica in an effort to bring the colony into the modern world and allow it to be rediscovered. Photography played a key role in reinventing Jamaica to please the class of tourists that were visiting at the time. Directly following emancipation, the conception of Jamaica in Britain was an island “ruined by emancipation, a region of derelict estates with a scattered population of negro squatters, paying no rent, living in squalid huts, supporting life on yams and bananas, and indebted to the calabash tree for the household utensils”<sup>3</sup>. In order to project a more desirable image, photographers or tourism promoters focused on landscape and the island’s vegetation. This perpetuated the “picturesque tropical garden” image, a theme we still see in tourism imagery today. This take on the landscape naturalized Jamaica’s plantations and made them appear to be aesthetically pleasing, a part of the island’s natural environment. This almost overwrites the original history of these plantations, making them more palatable to the coming tourists. Does it lack the enjoyment/thrill and wow-factor? Is the history of the plantation not rich enough? Is the reality of slavery too harsh to face?



Figure 6: Jack Fruit (photography by Duperly and Sons).



Figure 7: Laborers “enjoying” sugarcane

To further control the tourist gaze, colonial exhibitions were held. These exhibitions, equivalent to guided tours, were “staged spectacles of nationalism, industrialization, and modernity.” Hosted by European powers, Jamaica’s exhibitions garnered interest, as well as investments, in products the island had for sale (such as bananas) and encouraged tourism. The key word here is “staged”. It raises the question, what is being hidden?

Promoters of the tourism industry urged tourists to view Jamaica as an island with the loveliest scenery. Lectures were held to project images of this “new found” scenery. Projected in a larger than life manner, these images, partnered with the promoter’s commentary, allowed people to explore the sensation of being in Jamaica. This living touch experience inspired audiences to either want to make a trip or inhabit the land presented to them.

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and though you cannot discredit the beauty of nature, photography has allowed the authenticity of beauty to be brought into question. “Those who have eyes to see [must see for themselves].”<sup>3</sup>

#### PEOPLE

Photography’s impact did not stop at the landscape, agriculture, and scenery. It trickled down to the people as well. Though originally brought to the island as slaves, Caribbeans born through generations were now the natives. As promoters of tourism worked their way through “new” lands, black Jamaicans sometimes ended up in some of these photos. Posing, they served as props or backgrounds for the agricultural crops. This mimicked the role black servants held in eighteenth century wealthy family portraits. When it came to inhabitants of the land, primarily black and Indian, they were often posed in a manner that projected the message promoters were trying to send. In Figure 7, laborers are seen posing on the ground holding sugarcane to their mouths. In reality, laborers would have been discouraged from consuming the agriculture they produced, both before and after emancipation. The white male figure in the back could be interpreted as an overseer, allowing the workers to eat the sugarcane. The purpose of images such as these was to project that the fruits of the land could sustain life, when in reality, it was the opposite. Many black natives were presented in photographs as disciplined workers. This was another tactic to make living in the Caribbean, with free black natives, more palatable.



Figure 8: Jamaica International Exhibition, 1891

Looking back on Jamaica during the period of exhibitions, in addition to potential patrons, the black population was encouraged to attend. Exhibitioners invited black Jamaicans in an effort to “educate” them. In their absence, newspapers stated, “illiterate people are simply too ignorant to come to the Exhibition, [and] their untrodden minds will be dead weight in the development of a New Jamaica”<sup>3</sup>. Statements such as these emphasized the ideal the ruling elite aimed to project socially. Promoters wanted black Caribbeans to appear obedient, lower class citizens of their own lands.

#### ARCHITECTURE

Through the progression of time – much like technology and transportation – the sovereignties of the tourist gaze advanced. Although it began as a selfish way for European countries to save face following emancipation, tourism later became the mainstay of economic prosperity for many Caribbean islands. As tourism amassed, tourist enclaves came to fruition, this was part of the “mass tourism” approach. Tourist enclaves contain a vast majority of the facilities and services needed for tourists and their enjoyment. These enclaves included hotels, casinos, and beaches – usually segregated from local inhabitants. This helped to push the image of “private white sand beaches” that are projected in promotions. In addition to this isolation, locals’ access may have been controlled or prevented. Most of these new resorts integrated International Style Architecture. This was the style of the modern movement, also referred to as minimalist architecture. It boasted the blurring of interior and exterior spaces, exposure of the buildings’ construction, and the use of modern materials: steel, concrete, and glass.

During the late twentieth century “mass tourism” evolved into “quality tourism”. “Quality Tourism” was introduced as an approach to manage the built environment of the Caribbean. This is the imagery that we see pushed to us today. It began focusing on the preservation of historical buildings, the incorporation of “caribbean style” elements, and took into account the cultural values of the islands. What we know today to be “Caribbean style” architectural elements were pulled from general ideas of Caribbean architecture rather than an analysis of the area, its styles, and traditions. Regardless, these elements can be seen as an expression of pride in the island’s architecture and history. With the switch to quality tourism caribbean architecture has been celebrated, and in turn, tourists interest has increased in caribbean architecture. Considering many historic buildings have colonial influence, the challenge now lies in balancing the past architectural styles with the details and historical elements of the caribbean.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In a time where black people had no control of the way they were perceived, the history of the Caribbean – as varied as it may or may not be – has framed its identity. From the people, to the land, to the buildings, the islands of the Caribbean have evolved – some more than others. The Caribbean will not cease to be perceived and with the advancements of technology, the question of authenticity will remain. The only thing we, as consumers, can do is go out and see for ourselves. As architects and designers, we must not be ignorant to our surroundings and its history. All together, we must face the harsh truths of history and reality, and move forward with compassion and appreciation.



Figure 9: Colorful buildings on Willemstad Waterfront

#### ENDNOTES

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Figure 10: Citadelle Laferriere in Cap-Haitien, Haiti