

Case-Based Study of Three Tourism-Dependent Islands in the Philippines

The Cases of Boracay Island, Aklan; Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro; & Coron, Palawan in the Philippines

Romeo B. Santos¹

rombsantos3@gmail.com

Co-authored by:

Michael V. Tomeldan

Abstract

This study looked into how three popular tourism island destinations in the Philippines respond to the challenge posed by the changing nature of tourists. The paper proposes a knowledge representation model to illustrate and explain the complex process between the tourists' consumption of a place and how the influences emanating from it manifest in the local contexts of culture and the environment of the island destinations. Following the pattern set by the model, the case study identifies manifestation of effects both in the physical and non-physical aspects of the local cultural landscape and the spatial character of the environment of the islands. It recommends further probe on this subject.

Keywords: tourists of Asian origin', touristic consumption, behavio-spatial correspondence, local cultural landscape

I. Background

The Philippines is one of South East Asian countries endowed with places where nature is said to be at its best. These places serve as destinations for tourists coming from various origins many of them seeking the 'legendary' beauty of tropical paradise. Foremost of these are terrific island spots that possess natural features unique to each island.

A couple of decades ago, the bulk of tourists coming to the Philippines were mainly from North America and Europe. This is apparently due to the country's western colonial heritage and the fact that it was home to a number of USA's military facilities.

¹ Romeo B. Santos was the Architecture Graduate Program Director at the UP College of Architecture in 2006. He remains a full-time professor in UP after finishing his PhD on Architectural Engineering at Chiba University in Japan and Master in Architectural Engineering at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. His specialization or research interests include project/construction management & economics, housing, building production system & technology, vernacular architecture, urbanization, and sustainable built environment. He continues to attend several courses abroad and among which he joined was the Housing Design and Development Course at Lund University in Sweden.



Figure 1: Central Philippines

In the recent years however, a visible change in the type of arriving tourists has been observed. The number of western tourist declines, while the ones originating from Asia continues to increase and composed mainly of people coming from South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and the mainland China².

This shift in the 'nature' of tourism, i.e., towards one that is dominated by 'tourists of Asian origin' may have far

² Japan, though being in Asia and a major tourist source traditionally, was not included in this cluster and lumped together with the developed countries of the west.

reaching implications. And the phenomenon in fact, is of paramount interest to many especially to people in Architecture, a field which is concerned with how the built environment is affected by human activities.

In line with this premise, the study, from which this paper takes off as an offshoot, seeks to determine how the changing nature of tourists effects changes in the environment. Specifically, the main thrust of the study focuses on the influences these 'tourists of Asian origin' have in the *local contexts* of the environment and culture of these places and how these influences translate and manifest themselves onto the local cultural landscape and the spatial character of the built environment.

Using a case-based study approach focusing on three islands, the study, among other methods proposed, will investigate in particular how the tourism-dependent islands of *Boracay in Aklan, Puerto Galera in Oriental Mindoro, and Coron in Palawan* respond to the challenge posed by these tourists of Asian origin.

As a preliminary report, this paper discusses the findings from the initial case study that was made. It works on the following specific objectives;

1. To look into how three popular tourists destination islands cope with the influx of tourists 'of Asian origin' and analyze comparatively the responses made by each in addressing the complex requirements of this new type of tourists.
2. To understand and explain the manifestation of influences of these tourists 'of Asian origin' to the local contexts of culture and the environment of the islands.
3. To formulate mechanics of analysis or paradigmatic model that will illustrate and explain how these influences translate and manifest themselves onto the local cultural landscape and the spatial character of the built environment of the islands.

II. A Quick Glance at Tourism Dynamics in the Philippines: A See-saw Performance

The Philippines' Department of Tourism (DOT) has set a target of two million six hundred thousand (2,600,000) tourist arrivals for 2006³. This is a very modest figure compared to what other countries have been getting in terms of tourism share. The ASEAN countries⁴ as a whole got 49.9 million (49,900,000) tourist arrivals in 2005 from a total of one hundred and forty million (140,000,000) that the world has recorded.

³ The DOT figures from January to May of 2006 show that this target has been met already and a projection that arrivals would even surpass the 3million mark is now in place.

⁴ The Philippines is one of ten member countries of the Association of South East Asian countries which includes Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, among others.

This clearly shows that the Philippines' share is just a meager portion of what other countries are getting, even as it is compared with those of the closer neighbors that are in fact considered its rival destinations.

But the country has reasons to be ecstatic at this small number target. With a long period of sluggish, roller coaster performance in this particular sector of the economy, the most recent years however have shown an upward trend in tourist arrivals despite the lingering, and the same crippling national problems that affected the figures in the decades past (Figure 2).

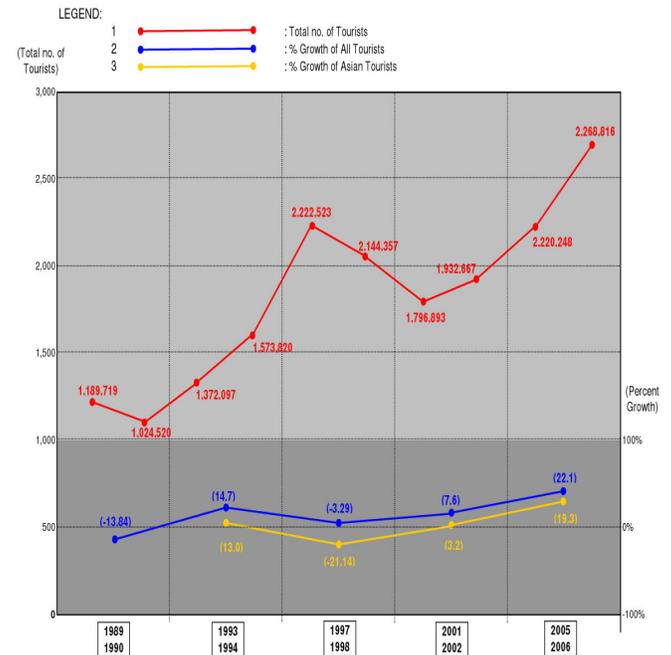


Figure 2: Growth of Tourism in the Philippines

As the figures in Figure 2 show, there was a reversal of growth in the 1989-1990 and 1997-1998 periods. The 1989-1990 period was characterized by coups d'état and political destabilization threats while the 1997-1998 was noted for the Asian economic meltdown. The period from the year 2000 and onward however, demonstrates a continuous rise of arrivals with the notable increases in the number of tourists coming from Asia.

A look at the composition of these arrivals shows that the top 4 Asian 'countries'⁵ where tourists are coming include South Korea, the mainland China, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The emergence of these 'tourists of Asian origin' started around a decade ago. The figures in Figure 3 show that notable is the phenomenal growth of the Korean tourists (South Koreans), while the Chinese (from the mainland) follow suit although at this stage, of still smaller size. The Chinese, just recently becoming nouveau riche themselves, are a newcomer in the brood. The figures of the first 5

⁵ Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China are rendered distinct countries here for simplicity.

months of 2006 show that the Koreans have taken over the lead from the Americans as the top tourist crowd in the country.

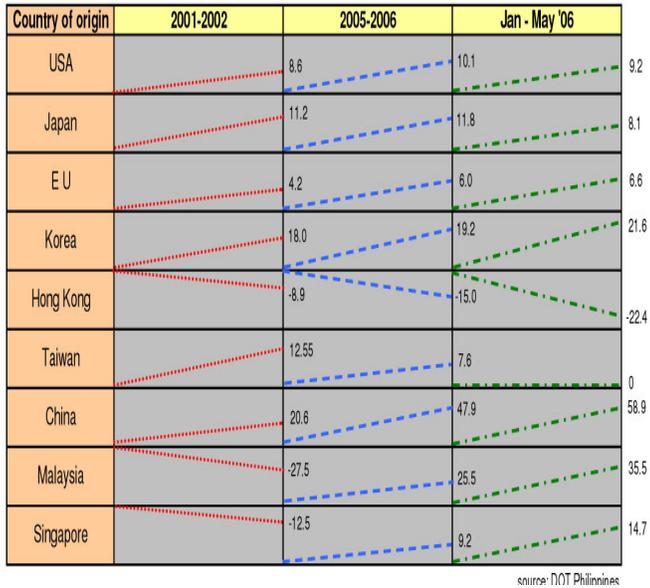


Figure 3: Notable Growth of Tourists of Asian Origin – RP

This new type of tourists of Asian origin spills over the Philippine archipelago, as more of them search for beaches, dive sites, and exquisite hideaways, among others, even driving many to far away islands. The islands of Boracay in Aklan, Puerto Galera in Oriental Mindoro, and Coron in Palawan provinces, respectively, are major destinations preferred by these tourists (Figure 4).

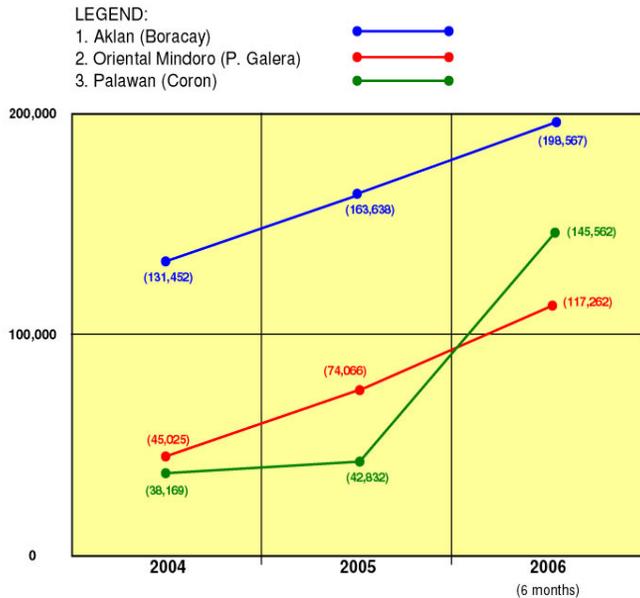


Figure 4: Foreign Tourist Arrivals in the 3 Provinces (2003-2006)

It is interesting to look at how the local context of the environment, local culture, and local people themselves in these islands respond to the challenge posed by this new brand of tourists. And a view taken from the vantage point

of Architecture could be of considerable significance- it being a field subscribing to the idea that the built environment is a factor of human activity and behavior.

III. Three Tourism – Dependent Islands in Focus

Case study was conducted of the 3 popular island destinations of (a) Boracay in Aklan, (b) Puerto Galera in Oriental Mindoro, and (c) Coron in Palawan which are located separately somewhere near the Central Philippines (Fig. 1).

The physical character of each island’s main ‘tourism hub’⁶, as well as other major parts, was documented through field investigation employing among other things actual measurements, mapping, photographs, and video filming. The spatial elements of selected spots were inventoried using this method as well. Personal interviews and interaction with the residents, local officials, the people running the tourism establishments, and with the tourists themselves elucidated essential information related to the matters being investigated.

Boracay Island, Aklan Province

Boracay Island is considered the most popular tourist destination in the Philippines today. It claims to be the ‘finest’ beach in the world. This is due, perhaps, to the unique quality of its white coral sandy beach the sand of which is almost of ‘talcum powder’ fineness that is rarely found⁷ anywhere else in the world. This is coupled with a wide plain of shallow water (a kilometer-long shoulder plain from shoreline to deep waters) that provides safe swimming arena for beach goers, where even toddlers could linger in water as parents watch with confidence.

Puerto Galera Islands, Mindoro Oriental Province

This group of islands is closer to Manila than the other two. This makes it accessible to most tourists who use Manila as entry point. The islands are said to have a paradisiacal beauty laid on palms-covered seashores. Puerto Galera is also said to be blessed with one of the world’s most beautiful natural harbors. It is famous for splendid beaches, coral reefs, and exquisite dive sites for both new and experienced divers.

Coron Islands, Palawan Province

The main island of Coron is believed to be the largest limestone formation in the Philippines. This is surrounded to the north by a number of limestone islets which tower

⁶ This denotes the section or area in the islands where most of tourism activities take place and which are most frequented by the tourists. This place may or may not be in the same location with the town proper or the main economic center (termed as ‘urban townscape’ in the study) of the locality.

⁷ This claim is deemed valid insofar as the current available information is concerned.

from the water, showing off majestic cliffs with abundant flora and fauna. The islets' unique formation hides pristine lagoons with turquoise and emerald waters. These were just recently awarded as the 'Philippines Cleanest and Greenest Inland Body of Water'.

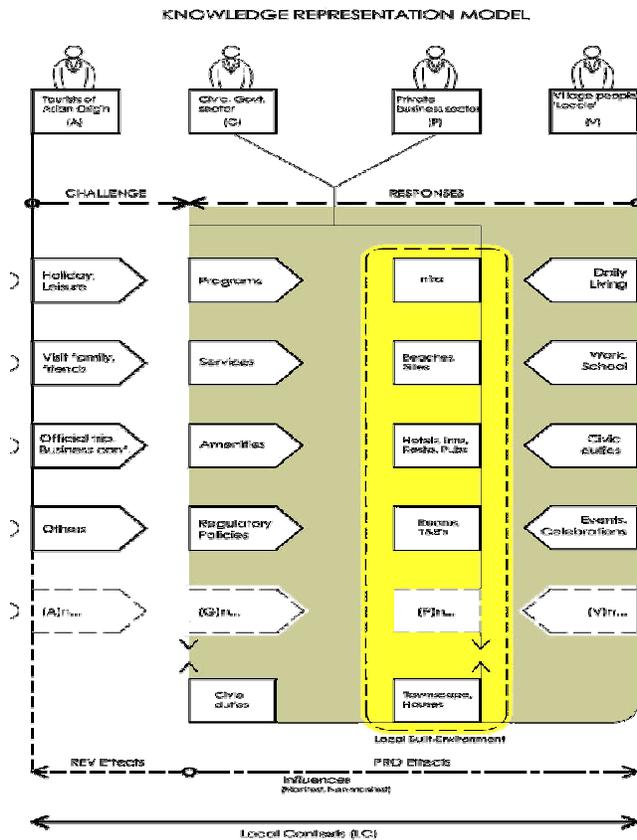


Figure 5: A Paradigm: Modeling the Process

This island destination is noted for scuba diving attractions. Wreckages and remnants of sunken Japanese war vessels which were bombed by the US Navy during the WWII form part of the major dive sites.

Figure 6 summarizes the salient features of the three islands.

IV. Challenge and Responses: Modeling the Process; 'Tourists of Asian Origin' Now Beginning to Mark in the 'Local Contexts' of the Islands

A PARADIGM: Modeling the process

The effects and influences of tourists in the local contexts of the environment and culture of a place must be a very difficult process to grasp if not totally impossible to comprehend.

Pearce, as quoted by Page (1995), pointed out that tourism is a principal agent of change. He highlighted however that

the complex interaction among tourism, urban areas, and the built & physical environment makes it virtually impossible to model the process of change with any degree of precision. This difficulty, anyway, should not stop anybody from trying to track down the effects of tourism in the cited areas, for Pearce acknowledged the possibility of identifying a 'framework for impact assessment' in just the same book.

In the book 'Tourism and Spatial Transformations: Implications for Policy and Planning' by Ashworth and Dietvorst (1995), a transformation model is described and proposed for analyzing the dynamic character of tourism. It was pointed out that "a prior understanding of the nature of tourism and specifically its dynamic character is required and is a necessity if a policy of intervention and its applications through planning and management" is to be effected. Further, it describes that "the principle behind the proposed transformation model is the assumption that people, through a variety of symbolic and material interventions, determine the transformation of the original physical and socioeconomic space valuable for tourism. The model shows the continuing transformation of the original resource by activities and interventions by producers and consumers".

Island	Main Unique Features	Main Attraction	Programs/ Tour Packages	Character of 'Tourism Hub'	Character of 'Urban Townscape'
Boracay	White, superline sandy beach Shallow bluewater	Beach Bluewater	Beach games Water sports Snorkeling Scuba diving Island hopping Happy hour nights	*Separate from urban/townscape *Relatively high-level of development *Cosmopolitan life-style & vibrant night life	*Chaotic, low level of development *Dense, crowded *Lively, dynamic
Puerto Galera	Beach & Harbor	Beach Dive sites	Beach games Water sports Diving Island hopping Happy hour nights	*Separate from urban landscape *Mid-level development *Vibrant nightlife	*Less-chaotic, mid-level development *Less dense *Little bit layback
Coron	Lagoons Limestone islets	Emerald lagoons Dive sites	Island, lagoons hopping Scuba diving Wildlife tour Hot spring	*No distinct segregation between tourism hub and urban townscape *Low level development *Islets 'tourism hub' taking form *Layback life-style	*Backward, generic townscape development *Low-level development *Layback life-style

Figure 6: Comparative Features of 3 Tourism Islands

There is a seeming contradiction here between the viewpoints of the authors, one negative about the accurate modeling of change relative to tourism while the other is positive about representing this process through a model. This just brings to fore the difficulty of dealing with the impact of tourism as a whole.

Notwithstanding these conflicting views however, this paper advances a model, a sort of *knowledge representation* that is aimed at 'capturing' the process under consideration. This is to put into an organized structure the information that represents the *dynamics* of the effects and influences of tourists in the local contexts of the environment and culture of a place, and on another angle, the challenge and the

corresponding responses of the islands. This paradigm helps to put that *dynamics* into a comprehensible perspective.

The *paradigm* illustration in **Figure 5** identifies four main actors or participants in what we may call the '*local contexts*' (LC) of the island. These are the following:

- 'tourists of Asian origin' (A)- who provide the challenge and exert influences in the local context of the island as they go about in their 'touristic consumption' of the place.
- government / civic sector (G) - this includes the local officialdom, collective groups such as civic associations, NGOs and the like, who have authority to implement measures to build or develop, lay out regulation, formulate programs, influence a cause, among other things.
- private / business sector (P)- who primarily provides through entrepreneurial activities both the required physical (hotels, shops, beaches, sites, and the like), and non physical facilities amenities, services, and program packages for touristic consumption by the tourists. The importance of the role of P in the process (as well as G) can be emphasized in the concept of *behavio-spatial correspondence*⁸ that this study strongly subscribes to.
- village people or the 'locales' (V) - inhabitants of the place who make up the local population. They constitute the major elements that compose the local cultural landscape and together with the other actors (they could shift role into any of b, c, & d depending on their function in the locality), are recipients of the influences coming from the tourists.

The tourists of Asian origin (A) generate 4 main requirements that in this study are considered part of the influence they exert and that constitute the *challenge* that emanate from them, as follows; (1) *holiday / leisure* -main touristic intention that requires (as with 2, 3, & 4) hotel spaces, beaches, sites, services, and the like; (2) *visit family / friends*; (3) *official trip / business conference*; (4) *others* -may include study English, health / medical reasons, finding a mate, etc. These four main requirements are identified by the Department of Tourism as the major reasons why tourists are coming.

These requirements put up the *challenge* and therefore, as the tourists go about their touristic consumption of a place, exert influences and affect the 3 other actors (G, P, & V), and the entire *local contexts*⁹ (LC) of the place as a whole as well. In response, as part of the economic reality in the process, P

develops, builds¹⁰, or sells, while G may also build, lay out policies, plans a program, or regulates. On the other hand, V in its encounter with A in all possible circumstances, would also absorb many influences from A and those corollary influences arising from G & P actions.

The effects absorbed by V may *translate* into both manifest and non-manifest responses, physically and non-physically. V may build his house, create the 'urban townscape', enhance the resultant local pop culture, strengthen local fiestas, etc., that as a result *may* or *may not* reflect distinctive marks that would identify exactly the direct ethnic influence of a particular type of tourist. This is also true with G & P as they go about their business of meeting the requirements of A. Note that A also absorbs influence and is affected by the other 3 actors G, P & V. In this model it is termed as *reverse effect* and maybe displayed by A in many various ways when he goes back to his country, or in any other venues.

All in all, the identified actors, the dynamics, and processes involved constitute the whole gamut of elements that make up the local cultural landscape, as well as the local environment in the islands.

The model, if valid, could easily indicate in what particular aspects the 'visible' manifestation of influence can be seen. The parts of the LC that can demonstrate this are the domains of G & P where programs, amenities, hotel buildings, rooms, shops, among other things, respectively, are made. These can reflect explicitly and concretely influences from outside source, in this particular case, the tourists.

Part of the domain of V as well will reflect manifestation of this influence. As the local people build their houses & communities and evolve their urban townscape, they, along the way, adopt borrowed styles, language, culture, and other things brought in by the tourists. These in the long run assimilate in the local cultural landscape and the built environment of the place.

THREE ISLANDS' RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE OF 'Tourists of Asian Origin': Tourists of Asian Origin Now Beginning to Mark in the 'Local Contexts' of the Islands

Following the direction set by the model in **Figure 5**, the study looked into the manifest effect of the tourist of Asian origin in the local cultural landscape and the spatial character of the built environment.

Figure 7 summarizes the findings made on inventorying these manifestations. A strikingly similar tendency in responses is noted particularly in Boracay and Puerto Galera

⁸ This concept holds that in any human undertaking, behavior setting, or activity, a corresponding physical space is required as the venue wherein that behavior, undertaking, or activity is staged (please see endnotes for further explanation). In this study, many requirements of A would have corresponding spatial need. The physical built environment resulting from it may display identifiable mark of the effects of A.

⁹ LC can stand for the entire local cultural landscape and the spatial built-environment of the islands.

¹⁰ The domain under P is where concrete, tangible actions of the actor are translated into physical spatial environment (hotel buildings, rooms, etc.) and is the likely candidate where identifiable effects of A can be manifest and pinpointed. The domain under G is the same although existing in non physical form.

islands. This *similarity* is seen in the way instances of physical spaces '*designed*' for a particular ethnic group are present both in the *tourism hub* and *urban townscape* elements of the *local built-environment*. The same similarity is seen in the less-tangible elements of the *local cultural landscape* which include formulation of socio-cultural program of events catering to a particular ethnic group, the high level of consciousness among the locales on the strong presence of a new type of tourist, among others.

As **Figure 6** indicates, Boracay and Puerto Galera islands share common feature of the *local built-environment*, i.e., the *tourism hub* is separated by physical distance from the *urban townscape*. This feature may not be a factor in the *similarity*, but this 'geographical' distance later on may factor in the **degree** by which these spatial elements (*tourism hub & urban townscape*) manifest physically the effects of this type of tourists.

The study does not focus yet on the factor of *time*, as well as the *size* of tourists, affecting the degree of manifestation in these physical spaces. But in the case of Coron displaying somewhat slowness in manifesting the effects visibly in its spatial elements, the reasons of time and size are to an extent obvious. Coron gets only a small share of Asian tourists compared to Boracay and Puerto Galera (**Figure 4**), and the island's experience with them is only just lately. This fact must have weighed in significantly in the process.

Although the visible physical manifestation of the Asian tourists' effects in the 3 islands now is not as intense as in Metro Manila¹¹ (where one could pinpoint easily tangible examples of physical effects), we still can identify development tendency, routes, or inclination toward & along distinct ethnic lines in Boracay, Puerto Galera, and Coron islands.

While in some instance, aesthetic inclination displays somewhat just a parody or mimicking of style that is inescapably Asian (such as the Balinese motif in some spatial examples), the clear intent of the local *actors* in the islands to *respond* to this new brand of tourists will in the long run manifest both physically and non-physically in their local contexts of culture and environment.

The current degree may not as yet pronounced as during the era of the North American and European tourists because the emergence of Asian tourists is but a new phenomenon and it may take more years to really see convincing and inescapable manifestations of these effects with remarkable magnitude.

In many respects though, it indicates that the current crop of 'tourists of Asian origin' is beginning to make its marks in local cultural landscape and the spatial character of the built environment of the islands.

IV. Conclusion & Recommendation

¹¹ Metro Manila is now host to the formation of 'Korean Towns', the Korean buildings & shops mushrooming in some quarters, the speculative left and right 'acquisition' by Asian guests of real estate properties, among other things.

This paper reported on how three tourism dependent islands respond to the challenge posed by a new type of tourists, the 'tourists of Asian origin'.

It advances a model that aims to illustrate and explain the complex relation between the tourists' consumption of a place and how the influences emanating from it affect and manifest in the local contexts of culture and environment of the island destinations. As the initial findings reveal, considerable similarities in the responses made by the three island subjects are observed both in the physical and non physical aspect of the local contexts. A number of these manifestations are a clear indication of ethnic influence of the tourists.

The coverage of this paper is a report on the initial stage of the study. The main study should be pursued further to deepen the consideration of varied factors dealing with how the effects of the changing type of tourists are manifest in the local environment and the local culture of a place. Other tourism sites, both of similar and distinct features, can be studied as well to enable the derivation of patterns or trends that will establish clear and accurate understanding of the process. The model of analysis advanced in this study can be reconsidered, improved, and supplemented, or even replaced by a new one if that will enable a more binding explanation of the phenomenon.

V. Endnotes

The study is premised on the idea that tourists are a strong agent of change. They carry with them dynamic influences that in the long run translate to observable and manifest changes, first, in their personal spaces, -both tangible and intangible, and next, in their immediate environment. At what level, form, or scale can these effects become observable and manifest in a bigger milieu which in this study is the island's local cultural landscape and its local environment, is a question of both theoretical and methodological importance the study attempts to address.

The study also banks on the premise that in any activity of man there is a corresponding space that 'contains' that activity. In this study, this idea is expressed by the term 'behavio-spatial correspondence' which postulates that in any human activity, which is an expression and manifestation of human behavior and his cultural context, there is always a space either physical or intangible that serves as venue or 'staging medium' of that behavior. In effect, it is to some extent possible to measure the changes in the space as influenced by that activity / behavior, in as much as the change or effect is observable and manifest.

VI. Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the assistance given by Mr. Bernardo S. Santos, Officer-In-Charge, Tourism Research and Statistics Division,

Case-Based Study of Three Tourism-Dependent Islands in the Philippines

Romeo B. Santos

Development Planning, Department of Tourism, Manila, Philippines.

Jaymalin, M. Tourists Continue to Flock to RP Despite Turmoil – DOT. Philippine Star, March 06, 2006, p. 3.

References

Ashworth, G. & Dietvorst A. (1995) *Tourism and Spatial Transformations: Implications for Policy and Planning*. CAB International Wallingford Oxon OX10 8BDE, UK.

National Ecotourism Strategy (2002) Department of Tourism, Department of Environment & Natural Resources, Philippines, and New Zealand Agency for International Development. AEC Graphics, Manila.

Hall, M. & Page, S. (2000) *Tourism in South & South East Asia: Issues and Cases*. Oxford OX2 Ebp, Butter Worth – Heinemann.

Page, S. (1995) *Urban Tourism*. Routledge, London.

Travel and Tourism Statistics 1997-2006. Department of Tourism, Philippines.

Island	Local 'Built-Environment'			Local 'Cultural landscape'		
	Tourism Hub'	Urban Townscape'	Incident Specific	Tourism Hub'	Urban Townscape'	Incident Specific
<i>Boracay</i>	*rooms & shops atmosphere designed for a particular ethnic group (Korean, Chinese) *leisure outlet ambiance designed for ethnic tourist types (Korean)	*travel agency space unmistakably ethnic (Korean)	* travel agency, shop space unmistakably ethnic (Korean)	*local tourism program designed for specific ethnic group *tour packages& event designed for Asian ethnic groups	*locals highly-conscious of Korean presence over other ethnic groups *expression of disdain as result of inter-ethnic encounters	*Asian TV soap opera popularized among locals (Korean)
<i>Puerto Galera</i>	*aesthetically designed spaces distinctively expressing ethnic line of tourist (Korean) *nightspots ambiance of space unmistakably identified of an ethnic identity (Korean)	*physical space for English study for Koreans, Chinese *shop catering to particular ethnic client (Korean)	*local & nearby towns providing English courses (Koreans, Taiwanese)	*local event programs targeted for ethnic groups (Korean, Chinese) *tour & leisure programs designed for Asians	*locals highly conscious of Korean presence as majority ethnic group *ambivalent feeling regarding presence of ethnic group	
<i>Coron</i>	*specific islets resort with motifs for Koreans *shops of foreign ownership displaying ethnic features or serving ethnic food menus (Taiwanese, Vietnamese)			*tourism office program catering to specific ethnic type of tourists (Koreans, Chinese)		*tour packages specifically for Koreans

Figure 7: Three Islands' Responses: Manifest Effects