



HAS IT *REALLY* GOTTEN BETTER?



INVESTIGATING CAYMANIAN IDENTITY AND
ENVIRONMENT THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL
DEVELOPMENT.



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AUTHORS DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in this dissertation, titled "Has it Really Gotten Better, Investigating Caymanian Identity and Environment Through Architectural Development," is my original research and has been carried out by me under the guidance of my supervisor. The dissertation represents my findings and reflections, and I have been solely responsible for its design, execution, and analysis.

This dissertation is not a reproduction of previously published material or the work of others, except where explicit acknowledgment has been made through citations and references. I have made every effort to acknowledge any external contributions that have informed and supported my research. I understand the importance of academic integrity and have adhered to the highest ethical standards in presenting my work.

This dissertation is a personal reflection of my deep connection to the topic of The Cayman Islands, which is not only an academic pursuit but also a matter that is very close to my heart and intimately tied to my culture. As I explore and analyse the subject, I bring forth a perspective shaped by my experiences and values. This work reflects my passion and commitment to furthering understanding, preserving, and sharing insights from the Caymanian heritage.

I acknowledge the guidance and support I have received throughout the process from my supervisor, Suzanne Fallouh, Artificial Intelligence, and other faculty members, as well as the contributions of my peers and those who have helped me along the way.

I also acknowledge the emotional and intellectual journey this dissertation has been, given the personal significance of the topic, and express my gratitude for the opportunity to explore and contribute to this area of research.

Signed:
Lia Isobel Piper
15/01/2025

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the evolution of Caymanian architecture, focusing on its effect on the Caymanian environment and identity, particularly studying the benefits and downfalls, financially and aesthetically. It investigates how the region's architectural styles have evolved from early vernacular homes to modern luxury developments while highlighting the environmental impacts of rapid urbanization and tourism-driven growth that negatively impact the local population. Using a combination of academic research, case studies, news articles, and photographic analysis, this study traces key architectural milestones, from the introduction of thatched cabanas by early settlers in the 1500s to the rise of concrete structures and high-rise buildings in the 21st century. A particular focus is placed on the challenges of coastal erosion, exemplified by the ongoing deterioration of Seven Mile Beach, which has been exacerbated by poor planning and overdevelopment. Furthermore, it examines the architectural transformation of Owen Roberts International Airport, highlighting the tensions between heritage preservation and modern development in a rapidly growing tourism economy. The findings suggest a critical need for sustainable design practices and more stringent urban planning regulations to mitigate the environmental damage caused by unchecked development while controlling the price surge of living. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of architecture, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation in the Caribbean, offering recommendations for a more balanced and sustainable approach to development in the Cayman Islands.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A controversial yet prevalent topic of discussion, not only locally, but worldwide... is Cayman changing for the better? The Cayman Islands is a set of three small islands in the Caribbean Sea, with a considerably short timeline of relevance, but has had a substantial impact on many people's lives. This dissertation investigates the effect of architectural evolution on the cultural identity and environmental landscape of the Cayman Islands, opening a much-needed conversation on the subject.

The islands, Grand Cayman in particular, are experiencing a significant development influx, driven by a burgeoning population, and evolving socio-economic dynamics. As a result, the demand for housing and commercial spaces has expanded, often prioritizing modern aesthetics over traditional Caymanian architectural styles. Coupled with this is the environmental consequences of the recent developments that has been causing, not only ecological, but structural and financial damage. This shift not only reflects global design trends but also raises concerns about the erosion of local culture, heritage, and disregard for the natural environment and low-income population. These changes can be attributed to the Cayman Islands' status as an attractive tropical tax haven, which has drawn affluent individuals and fostered the development of a high-end environment that is increasingly unaffordable for the local population. While tourism continues to be a crucial source of revenue, this focus has sparked significant concerns about its impact on local communities. As government policies prioritize infrastructure and projects that cater to affluent tourists, the rising cost of living, displacement of residents, and widening socio-economic gaps have become pressing issues.

Given the current events, which will be explored in this dissertation, this issue is crucial in understanding the fading presence of Caymanian culture and environment. By analysing the historical evolution of architecture and examining key projects, this research will investigate how these design trends have shaped local living conditions and the broader cultural landscape. Aiming to inform discussions on sustainable development, offering insights into how architectural growth can be better balanced with preserving local heritage and ecological health.

As the author, I bring firsthand knowledge of the subject, having grown up in the Cayman Islands and witnessed its significant changes over time. To support my analysis, I will compile publicly available data, such as population statistics, and historical documents. In addition, I will gather insights from public media sources, such as Art, Radio, and social media to express the raw opinions of local residents. These sources will provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into how architectural development has impacted the cultural identity of the islands, with the aim of offering a comprehensive understanding of this transformation. While research on the Cayman Islands often focuses on economics and tourism, few studies address the effects of architectural change on cultural identity and the environment. This dissertation will fill that gap, providing a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of development and offering recommendations for more sustainable growth.

Chapter 2: Cultural Context of Caymanian Identity and Environment

2.1 Defining Caymanian Identity

The identity of the Cayman Islands has developed through a mix of historical, cultural, and environmental factors. British colonial rule introduced European governance and commerce, while the blend of transitory inhabitants fused their cultures into one.

Figure 1

Cayman's Visual Identity



Note. L. Piper, 2024, Graphic collage.

The argument of 'What it means to be a Caymanian' has been abundant due to the constant immigration and blend of backgrounds. Figure 1 displays a collection of imagery tied to Caymanian culture. Caymanians find themselves outnumbered in their own country as only 45% (Cayman Islands Government, 2024) of the working population is Caymanian, often making them feel like foreigners in their own country.

Over time, Caymanian society has been deeply influenced by its history of maritime trade, specifically its abundance of turtles as in 1503, Christopher Columbus first sighted "two very small and low islands, full of tortoises, as was all the sea all

about, in so much that they looked like little rocks, for which reason these islands were called Las Tortugas." (www.gov.ky, 2023). From the mid-19th century onward, immigration from places such as Jamaica, Honduras, and other Caribbean islands, has further diversified the culture. In the current day, many immigrate from Canada, South Africa, many European countries, and the USA. Cayman is currently a self-governing British overseas territory with its currency, the Cayman Islands dollar (KYD).

Due to the mixture of ethnic backgrounds, the Caymanian dialect is unique and has a distinctive accent that reflects specifically Scottish, Irish, Jamaican Patois, Spanish, and US English. (Wells, n.d.) Being a Christian-based country with a 67.8% Protestant population (www.cia.gov, 2024) and over two hundred existing churches (Cayman Travel Guide, 2018). Religion plays a significant role in shaping cultural values and community life.

Caymanians celebrate a range of traditions that reflect their historical and cultural diversity. One of the most notable celebrations is Pirates Week (Figure 2), which celebrates the island's pirate heritage and its role in its history. This event blends historical reenactments, cultural performances, and community celebrations, vividly reflecting the national identity. Another notable celebration is Batabano (figure 3), a vibrant carnival usually held in the first week of May. The name "Batabano" refers to the tracks left in the sand by turtles as they come ashore to nest. (Batabano Cayman Carnival, n.d.) This event features colourful parades full of elaborate costumes, music, and dance, drawing locals and tourists alike.

Figure 2

Kids preparing for Junior Batabano



Note. Cayman Compass, 2023, Photograph.

Figure 3

Cayman Islands Pirates Week



Note. L, Hazlewood, 2023, Photograph.

2.2 Defining Caymanian Environment

The Cayman Islands - made up of three Islands in the Caribbean Sea, the largest and most populated is Grand Cayman, hosting the capital city of George Town covering 76 sq miles, with an average elevation of 6ft (Brunt & Davies, 1994). The other, smaller islands, consisting of Cayman Brac, 14 sq miles, and Little Cayman, 12 sq miles (Wells, n.d.), currently have a much smaller population but were the first to be inhabited.

Figure 4

Locality Map showing of Cayman Islands



Note. W, Johnston, A, Cooper, 2022, Annotated Map.

The islands are considerably low lying but with the shoreline being protected by a fringing reef and abundant mangrove density the shoreline is substantially protected. Some of the notable geological features in the Cayman Islands are Iron shore, marshlands, mangroves, and our world-famous 7-mile beach, a semi-continuous sandy beach along the west side of the island.

The climate is tropical with temperatures ranging from 26°C – 30°C (Powell, 2018). Located in the Caribbean hurricane belt, while in low frequency, Cayman experiences hurricanes around June to November (Johnston & Cooper, 2022). No other natural disasters pose a large enough threat to the islands.

2.3 The Connection Between Identity and Environment

Caymanian identity is intricately linked to the natural environment, The islands' physical geography is not only central to the local economy but also forms a key part of the Caymanian sense of place. From a young age, Caymanians develop a deep connection with the sea, with activities such as fishing, free diving, and boating being integral to local life.

Figure 5

Group playing dominoes while others chill at Smith Cove Beach



Note. By Macaulay, 2015, Photograph.

Easter camping, for example, a long-standing tradition, where families gather at beaches like Barkers Beach and Starfish Point from Holy Thursday to Easter Monday. As shown in Figure 5, It is a homage to the early days of living off the land and sea and a nod to simpler times. (Cayman Compass, 2023). This tradition underscores the importance of the coast and the communal bonds strengthened by these gatherings.

Fishing is also central to Caymanian identity, not just as an economic activity, but as a cultural practice passed down through generations. The Cayman Trench is the deepest area of the Caribbean Sea; the low-lying islands shelves support abundant coral reefs (Doe.ky, 2020). This ideal environment creates a not only a bountiful fishing location but exquisite diving site.

Figure 6

Fishing in the Cayman Islands



Note. By Visit Cayman Islands, Photograph.

2.4 Environmental Challenges

Mangroves, an integral part of Cayman's coastal protection and once common along coastlines, are being cleared for construction. The Mangrove Conservation Plan deems any unapproved clearance illegal yet Figure 7 shows the NRA clearing mangrove land shortly after World Mangrove Day, showing a blatant disregard for the island's natural ecosystem.

Figure 7

Mangroves bulldozed by the NRA in West Bay



Note. Cayman News Service, 2023, Photograph.

Turtle nesting sites are abundant and deeply connected to the local culture. These nesting sites have been at risk due to human development and activity, destroying eggs. Additionally, artificial light causes disorientation of hatchlings as they rely on natural light from the horizon to guide them to the ocean (Price et al., 2018).

Figure. 8

New turtle nesting numbers confirm continuing success of Cayman Turtle Centre's release programme.



Note. Cayman Turtle Centre, 2020, Photograph.

Climate change has been a threat to the current Caymanian environment as the rising sea levels have been damaging the developments that were built too close to the high-water mark. Causing flooding and structural damage that contaminates the water further damaging the marine ecosystem.

2.5 Threats to the Local Identity

Globalization, immigration, and tourism have led to significant cultural changes in the Cayman Islands. Tourism, alongside financial services, and real estate are the primary drivers of economic growth (Cayman Islands Government, n.d.), however, the influx of visitors and luxury developments to sustain this economic growth has caused

gentrification and strained infrastructure. Many Caymanians feel their traditional way of life is being lost, with rising costs pushing them abroad.

The increasing number of expatriates who are not educated on the history of Caymanian culture has led to an erosion of authenticity and appreciation for the heritage. While the island has embraced a diverse international community, there is a noticeable lack of understanding of local traditions. This was brought to light as a caller to a local radio station shared his opinion on the Cayman Turtle Centre stating that they should no longer sell turtle meat and 'call KFC the cultural dish' (Talk Today, 2024) This highlights the disregard of Caymanian cultural practices.

Chapter 3: Historical Context of Caymanian Architecture

3.1 First settlers

Following Christopher Columbus's discovery of the three islands in 1503, (Wells, n.d.) the earliest forms of shelter were simple, temporary structures known as thatched cabanas, used by voyagers and sailors during stopovers (Doak, 2009) These shelters were not designed for long-term habitation but served practical purposes. Constructed from locally available materials, such as palm thatch and wooden frames (Doak, 2009).

It was only in the early 1700s that settlers began to establish permanent communities on the islands. Between 1734 and 1741, England offered land grants (Cayman Islands National Archive, Government Information Services and Cabinet Office, 2023) to encourage permanent settlement. As part of the settlement terms, settlers were given instructions to build simple dwellings known as wattle and daub cottages (Doak, 2009). This construction method involved creating a framework of wooden stakes (wattle) filled with a mixture of mud or clay (daub) (Salmon, 1999, p.14)

Figure 9

Traditional Caymanian Homes.



Note. Wilson, S, 2020, Photograph.

A key example of this style in Figure 9, 'Miss Lassies house', built in 1879, and completed in 1881 (Muttoo, 2012) was the home of Gladwyn K. Bush, one of the island's most

celebrated artists. The cottage is notable not only for its personal and historical importance but also for its unique architectural features, blending traditional Caymanian vernacular with the personal touch of its inhabitant. The house itself is characterized by her vivid abstract paintings that cover the interior and has been declared a national historic interest, one of six in the Cayman Islands (World Monuments Fund, n.d.) Historically this home was originally adorned with a thatch roof then shingled and now corrugated zinc roofing (Doak, 2009). It is notable that these structures were purposefully built on a stilts system to prevent flooding during storm surges.

3.2 Seafaring

In the 1800s, overfishing led to the depletion of the turtle population, a primary source of income for many Caymanians. This economic shift prompted many seamen to build larger boats or seek opportunities abroad (Doak, 2009). As they returned from their voyages, they brought with them new architectural influences, most notably the wood-boarded cabin style. These cabins, characterized by their prominent veranda, vibrant, often pastel colours, and featuring decorative "gingerbread" accents (Doak, 2009)—intricate wooden trim and ornamental details around windows and doors — that added a touch of elegance to these otherwise functional homes.

Figure 10

The Pink House



Note. M, A, 2020, Photograph.

Shown in Figure 10 is a key example of this cabin style, The Old Homestead, this vibrant pink, white and green home was built in 1912 (Cayman Compass, 2005) shows the intricate detailing and captivating colours. This style is recognizable by its large veranda porch at the front entrance and the low-profile corrugated zinc roof. Built using prefabricated timber frames creating a space of practical construction practices for fast development.

3.3 'Birthplace of Democracy'

Pedro St. James, built in 1780 by a William Eden (Visit Cayman Islands, 2025), is one of the Cayman Islands' most significant architectural landmarks. Shown in Figure 11, this two-story building with a stone built first floor. Its political importance lies in its role as the site of the first Legislative Assembly meeting in 1831 (Wells, n.d.), earning it the title of the "Birthplace of Democracy". The construction of Pedro St. James marked the arrival of more formal, grandiose structures on the islands, to represent the local population's growing political and economic aspirations.

Figure 11

Skip the Line: Pedro St. James Castle General Admissions and Guided Tour Ticket.



Note. Classic Vacations, Photograph.

This Building style is known as 'The Upstairs House' or 'The Mansion' and is characterized by the wattle and daub style as its base and ground floor, which was then extended upwards, framed via shiplap. A unique feature of these styles of buildings was the prominent staircases, usually placed front and centre. This design style was brought about due to the desire for larger homes.

Figure 12

Untitled (Upstairs House)



Note. Sibley, J, 1987, Watercolour on paper, Located at the National Gallery, Grand Cayman.

The artwork in Figure 12 perfectly captures a classic style of Caymanian art with this easily identifiable watercolour technique. Showcasing the 'upstairs house' style with the zinc roof, decorative wooden fretwork and aspects that perfectly capture the average everyday life such as hanging laundry, open windows and people engaging in conversation in passing.

3.4 Industrial Revolution

The bungalow style gained popularity in the 1920s (National Trust Cayman, 2020) after the First World War. These single-story homes emphasized simplicity, with low pitched roof, a prominent entrance porch on the short side of the home and framed with battered columns. A classic example of this home is shown in the Figure 13, a stand alone home on the beachfront on South Church Street.

Figure 13

Cayman Bungalow on South Church Street.



Note. Google Maps, 2019, Screenshot.

3.5 Introduction of Concrete

Concrete block construction became increasingly popular in the Cayman Islands due to the Flowers family, now known as the company C.L. Flowers & Sons Ltd. Who started manufacturing concrete blocks in the 1960's (Flowers Group, 2022). This building style became very popular due to its durability and resilience in the face of hurricanes and tropical storms.

Figure 14

Renewed Town Hall is ready.



Note: Wilson, S, 2010, Photograph.

A beloved example of this building style is the 1919 Peace Memorial, built by Capt. Royal Bodden in 1923 (Sedgley, 2024), shown in Figure 14. This building was to serve as a courthouse, assembly room and town hall but in the current day has been left dormant. As seen in front of the Peace Memorial is a clock tower that was later built in 1937 in memory of King George V (Sedgley, 2024) The individual concrete blocks that built both structures are very prominent in their design such was the white paint that covers it.

3.6 The Rise of Tourism

During the 1950s and 1960s, (Doak, 2009) the Cayman Islands saw significant growth in tourism, which spurred the development of small boutique hotels catering to affluent visitors seeking a relaxed, intimate experience. These hotels often featured a mix of Caribbean and colonial architectural styles, incorporating bright colours, open spaces, and local materials to blend with the island's tropical environment.

Figure 15

Garden of the Hyatt Regency Hotel



Note. Mapio, 2025, Photograph.

A notable hotel during this period, constructed in the 1980s (Bird, 2023), The first major 5-story hotel, the Hyatt Regency Hotel was a popular destination for tourists and locals alike as it created a warm and inviting atmosphere that promoted the islands 'slow life' due to its golf course, beach suites and Sunday brunches. As seen in Figure 15 the Hyatt was designed with an intricate facade and veranda that gave space for the

local poinciana plants to grow and flower. These design features replicated the early Caymanian architectural features in a newer fashion.

3.7 The Rise of Banking and Commerce

The 1980s and 1990s (Doak, 2009) marked a period of rapid growth in the banking and finance sectors in the Cayman Islands, driven by the expansion of offshore banking and global commerce, such like the exemption of taxes in 1966 (Hughes, 2017) and the Cayman Islands stock exchange opening in 1997 (Narborough, 1997).

This economic boom resulted in the construction of modern office buildings, high-rise hotels, and commercial centres, particularly along Elgin Avenue (Doak, 2009). International design trends, influenced by North American and European models, played a significant role in shaping the aesthetic of these buildings, along with modern technologies that made the buildings more efficient and adaptable. Figures 16-17 are examples of buildings during this era.

Figure 16

Cayman National Bank



Note. Cayman National, n.a., Photograph.

Figure 17

Cricket Square



Note. W. Signal, Photograph.

3.8 Hurricane Ivan

Hurricane Ivan, which struck in 2004, (Young, 2004) caused widespread devastation across the Cayman Islands, damaging thousands of homes, and buildings with a total of £1.8 billion in damages (Craig et al., 2006)

Figure 18

Hurricane Ivan caused catastrophic damage throughout Grand Cayman when it struck the island in 2004.



Note. A. Markoff, 2021, Photograph.

As seen in Figure 18, the destruction prompted a revaluation of building standards (*Hurricane Ivan 20th Anniversary*, 2019), leading to the implementation of stronger construction regulations. To withstand future hurricanes, newer buildings adopted more resilient architectural practices, including reinforced concrete structures, hurricane-resistant windows, and roofs designed to endure high winds.

3.9 'The New Town'

Camana Bay, envisioned in 1995, developed in 2004 (*Building Camana Bay*, 2020), the development includes residential, commercial, and recreational spaces, continuously growing to this current day, Camana Bay has become a hub of Grand Cayman as its emphasis on walkability with everything you could need.

A modern, master-planned town that blends contemporary architectural design with sustainable urban principles such as LEED® certified designs. A development that, with its use of colour, decorative louvers and abundance of green spaces managed to replicate the island feel in a modern and timeless approach as seen in Figures 19 and 20.

Figure 19

Camana Bay



Note. Olin, n.a., Photograph.

Figure 20

Camana Bay



Note. M. Herbert, 2023, Photograph

3.10 The 21st Century

In the current day, Cayman is a bustling location for business and a luxury getaway with the population jumping 87.6% from 2000 – 2024 (Worldometer, 2024) and with a robust construction industry (Cayman Islands Government, n.d.) the islands development continues to grow. This period saw the skyline alter drastically as the building height regulations increased from 5-stories to 10-stories (Cayman Islands Planning Department, 2022). Figures 21 and 22 show the ultra-modern, and contemporary style hotels and condominiums came about on Seven Mile Beach, clad with glass, and sharp geometric shapes.

Figure 21

Watercolours 207



Note. Property Cayman, n.a., Photograph.

Figure 22

Kimpton Seafire, Grand Cayman



Note. Poma Metals, n.a., Photograph.

The presence of gated neighbourhoods became increasingly popular, seeing many communities' pop-up along South Sound and West Bay Road as shown in Figures 23 and 24. Offering a sense of exclusivity these spaces became popular with families and retirees who value safety and high-end amenities. The design style of these neighbourhoods have varied slightly but held a noticeable modern trend similar to the hotels mentioned in Figures 21 and 20.

Figure 23

Vela



Note. IRG International, n.a., Photograph.

Figure 24

Cypress Point North, Crystal Harbour



Note. Milestone Properties, n.a., Photograph.

Due to the high-end clientele now residing in the islands, a surge of multi-million-dollar homes became rampant. The style of these homes ranged from Mediterranean, cottage-style to ultra-modern show in Figure 25 – 27.

Figure 25

Castillo Caribe, An Estate of Dreams | Grand Cayman | Cayman Islands Sotheby's International Realty



Note. Cayman Islands Sotheby's International Realty, 2024, YouTube Clip.

Figure 26

Modern Five Bedroom Luxury Mansion with Tesla X On the Canal in The Cayman Islands



Note. James Edition, 2024, Photograph.

Figure 27

Rip Kai



Note. Worldwide Dream Villas, n.a., Photograph.

This influx of these upscale residences has resulted in many Caymanians struggling to secure housing, as they are priced out of their own communities. The gap between the wealthy and low-income residents is widening, creating a pressing issue that requires attention from policymakers to ensure that the growth in luxury real estate does not come at the expense of the broader population.

Chapter 4: Environmental Effects – A Case Study on 7 Mile Beach

4.1 Introduction

Seven Mile Beach is a 9.3-km stretch of sandy beach, located on the leeward, western coast (Seymour, 2000) a major tourism asset. However, climate change, sand loss and rapid architectural development along this stretch of coastline has raised concerns about the environmental consequences of overdevelopment and poor planning.

Figure 28

Seven Mile Beach Location



Note. Annotated Google Earth Map.

Shown in Figure 28 is the stretch of 7-mile, outlining many high-market properties. This location has been under threat in recent years, with coastal erosion at the forefront of their properties causing many instances of flooding and structural debris after storms.

Historically Caymanians viewed beach front properties as high risk due to their knowledge of hurricanes and their effects. Due to this, most homes were built inland, and beach front properties were commonly used as burial sites, such as cemetery beach, West Bay as seen in Figure 29.

Figure 29

Cemetery on the windy beach of Northside of Grand Cayman



Note. F. Vallengri, 2009, Photograph.

4.2 Coastal Erosion

Coastal erosion in Grand Cayman has increasingly become a significant issue, with rising concerns over the loss of beachfront areas. The erosion process has intensified in recent years, cutting off sections of Seven Mile Beach that were previously walkable (Figures 30 and 31), dramatically altering the landscape, and posing threats to both local infrastructure and the tourism industry. This is accounted by not only climate change, but the structures built along this iconic stretch impeding the natural flow of sand.

Figure 30

Marriott Beach Resort shoreline November 2012



Note. Ulster University, 2023, Photograph.

Figure 31

\$21 million proposal to restore Seven Mile Beach



Note. J. Whittaker, 2021, Photograph.

Figure 32

*Shoreline change on a tropical island beach, Seven Mile Beach, Grand Cayman:
The influence of beachrock and shore protection structures*



Note. Ulster University, 2023, Annotated Map.

As shown in Figure 32 it is evident that the shoreline loss is especially prominent in section E and C. A notable example of this Royal Palms, constructed in the late 1960's (Cayman Compass, 2025) along with the tourism boom as discussed in Chapter 3.6. This spot became an iconic hotspot for both locals and tourists (Wheaton, 2020). The following images show the progression of beach loss throughout the years:

Figure 33

Picture of Royal Palms

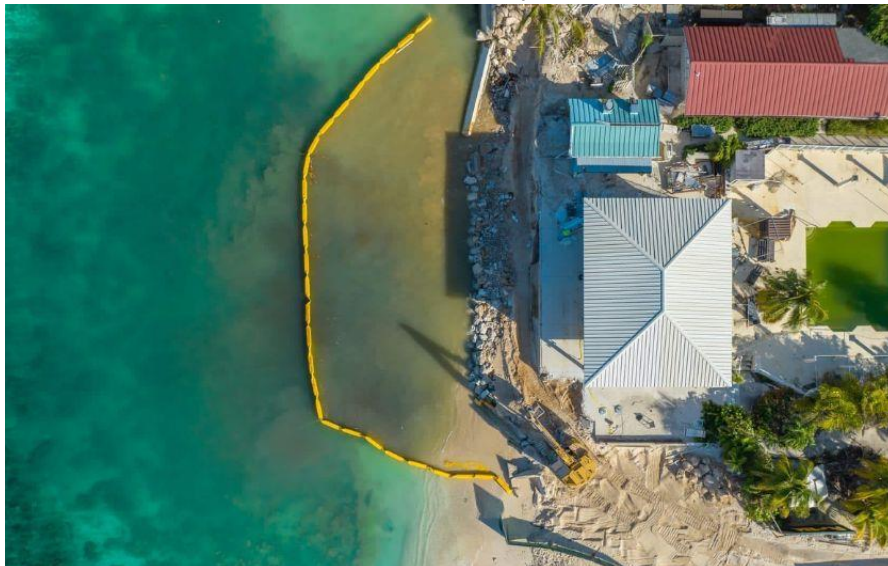


Note. Trip Advisor, n.d., Photograph.

For years royal palms had a sufficient beach front property where people laid out on their deck chairs, played volleyball, and enjoyed various water sports.

Figure 34

Works in front of Royal Palms



Note. J. Schutte, n.d., Photograph.

Royal Palms was officially closed in 2020 (CMR, 2020) amidst the Covid lockdown, the neglect caused the sea wall to require support where the owners of the property placed boulders for temporary support, causing an influx of sediment to become loose and threaten the surrounding coral and sealife.

Figure 35

Water surges past the Royal Palms during the passage of Tropical Storm Helene in October 2024



Note. Cayman Compass, 2024, Photograph.

Figure 36

The demolition of the old structure at the iconic Royal Palms site on Tuesday 7 Jan



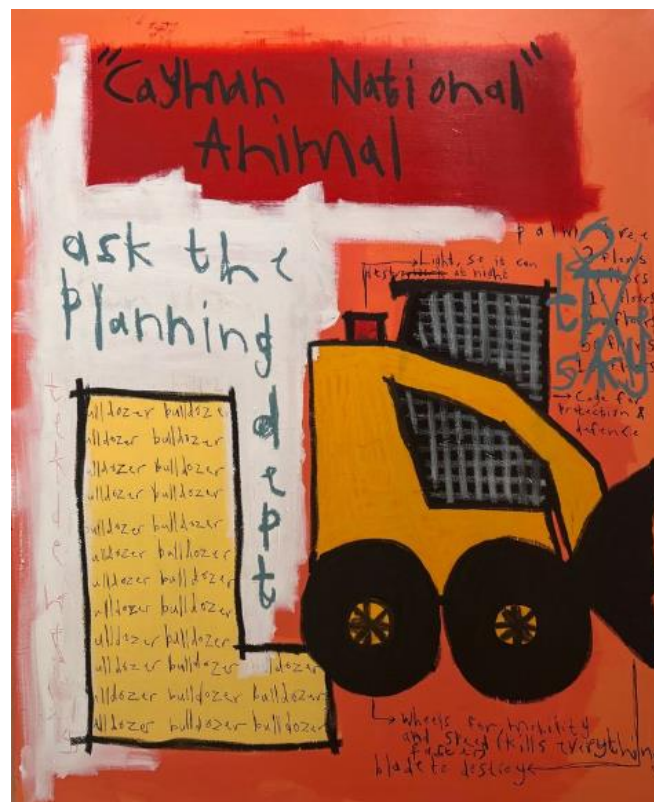
Note. Cayman Compass, 2025, Photograph.

4.3 The Response

Due to this significant ecological degradation and overdevelopment, many people strongly oppose the matter. Iain Macrae's art piece "Bulldozer" as shown in Figure 37, symbolizes the anger many Caymanians feel towards the destruction of their natural environment. Giving the Caymanian voice a space to be heard as he voices the thoughts that "occupied the forefront of public discourse for as long as I can recall." (MacGillivray, 2024)

Due to this significant ecological degradation and overdevelopment, many people strongly oppose the matter. Iain Macrae's art piece "Bulldozer" as shown in Figure 37, symbolizes the anger many Caymanians feel towards the destruction of their natural environment. Giving the Caymanian voice a space to be heard as he voices the thoughts that "occupied the forefront of public discourse for as long as I can recall." (MacGillivray, 2024)

Bulldozer



Note. I. Macrae, 2023, Acrylic & Oil Stick on Canvas.

Additionally, many public protests have been held. Such as the "Protect Our Future" Organisation shown in Figure 38 shows their protest for the Aqua Bay development that poses a threat of amplified coastal erosion, as well as "Love of KY" in Figure 39,

with signs reading “Wise man built house on rock, foolish man built house on sand” bringing light to the developments building too close to the beach.

Figure 38

Coastal Development Erodes Our Future



Note. Protect Our Future, 2023, Photograph.

Figure 39

Big thank you to everyone that came out today.



Note. Love of KY, 2024, Photograph

Despite the public response, warnings have been in place for years as Clark (1988) makes recommendations for the preservation of the beach to be “proclaimed a national policy and coastal construction regulations should be adopted” (Clark, 1988) and then in 2003 the lack of adequate protection for the beach provided by the Development and Planning Laws & Regulations was still noted as a concern (Clark, 2003). With replenishment plans in the works since 2021 (Cayman News, 2023) and the tourism minister declaring it a “national and economic emergency.” (Stampp, 2024) There is hope for the saving of Seven Mile Beach.

Chapter 5: Shifting Design – Case Study on Owen Roberts International Airport

5.1. Early Days

Owen Roberts International Airport was originally built as a civilian airfield in 1953 (Hughes, 2017). Named after the founder, Owen Roberts, a British Royal Air Force Wing Commander (Craton, 2003, p. 334)

Figure 40

The building of Owen Roberts International Airport



Note. Compass staff, 1984, Photograph.

This former design encapsulated a distinctive architectural identity that reflected both the island's natural resources and cultural heritage. The use of coral stone as seen in Figure 41 imbued the structure with an organic, local texture.

Figure 41

ORIA in 1990



Note. W. Scott, 1990, Photograph.

The prominent A-frame roofs with strong crosshatch wooden beams as seen in Figures 40, 42, 43 and 44 evoke of the early settlers' thatched cabanas mentioned in chapter 3.2, providing the airport with an air of familiarity and cultural pride while symbolically embracing the island's heritage.

Figure 42

Owen Roberts International Terminal



Note. Arch and Godfrey, n.d., Photograph.

Figure 43

Owen Roberts International Airport



Note. Alluring World, n.d., Photograph.

Figure 44

Owen Roberts International Airport



Note. RG Media, n.d., Photograph.

Figure 44 and 43 depict the unforgettable design feature that was a unique vantage point where people could watch their loved one's de-boarding their flight, while visually engaging for onlookers, it likely posed a significant safety concern for immigration. This viewing space was sheltered by the wood-clad A frames that mimicked the look of thatch roofing.

5.2 The Redesign

Due to Cayman's growing visitor and residential population, the original airport design was experiencing maximum capacity leading to overcrowding (Praveen, 2015). With a master plan in play since 2015 (Augustine, 2015) it was formerly opened in 2019 by Prince Charles in March 2019, Increasing the airport's capacity from 77,000ft² to 207,000ft².

Figure 45

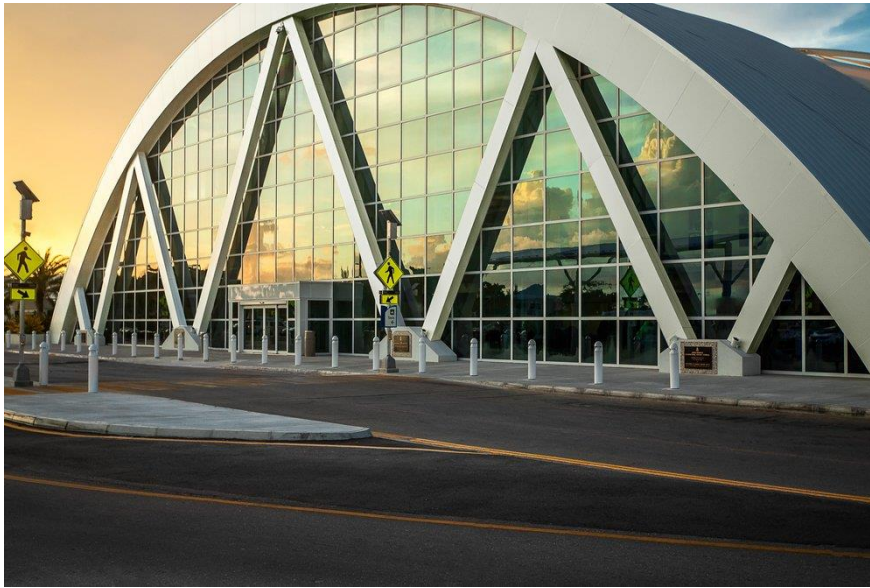
Parking



Note. CIAA, n.d., Photograph.

Figure 46

_BP_2977-HDR-EDIT-ENHANCED.JPG



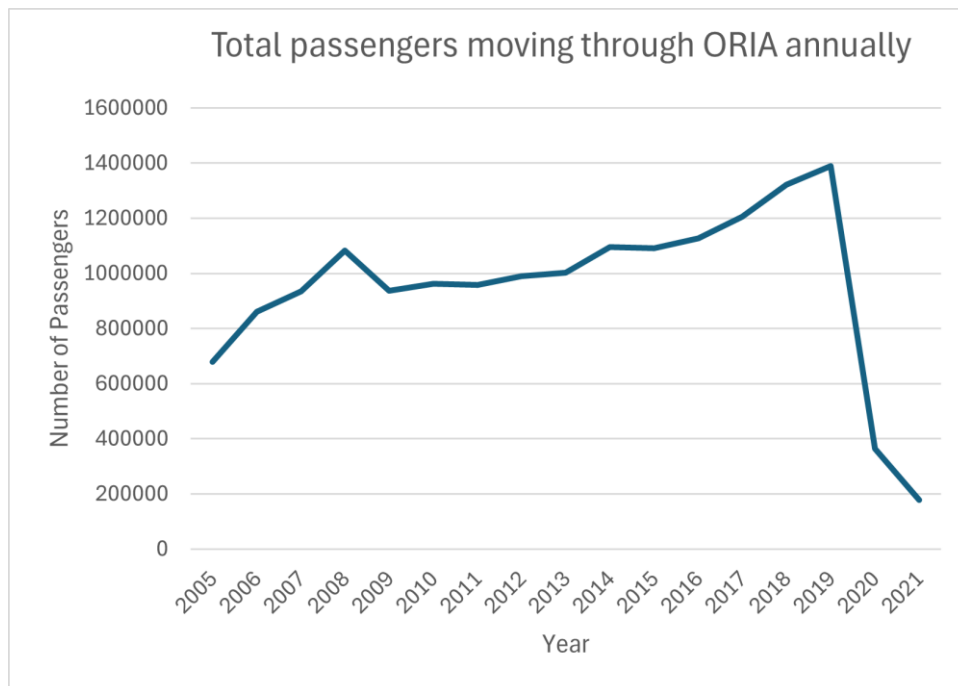
Note. W. Signal, n.d., Photograph.

At first glance the airport's redesign is stark and modern with its white facades and large glass windows, giving the public a feeling that they lost a piece of their heritage. Providing reasoning behind their design they released a statement explaining they designed it to reflect the country's history and achievements, inspired by turtles with the central piece being the body and the joining sections being its fins. Changing from the geometrical shape to a rounded form they kept the A-frame design within, in a group of three to symbolize the three islands (Praveen, 2015). With this design feeling very foreign to the local heritage it hints towards a preference to appeal to high-end international clientele.

Due to its expansion, the airport will be able to run more efficiently with “Increased air connectivity will be an important driver of the global economic recovery” (Verhoeven, 2021). After 2015 there was a steady increase in passenger volume within ORIA but as shown in Figure 47 there was a drastic drop during the COVID pandemic where not only the airport was closed, but the entire country was shut off.

Figure 47

Total passengers moving through ORIA annually



Note. Data set from Cayman Islands Airports Authority, 2005 -2021, Line Graph.

A notable event that worried the Caymanian population was the complications that followed its opening such as the flooding of the departure lounge and luggage arrivals that occurred after heavy rain in 2019 as shown in Figure 48. Concern was raised as the airport is a crucial piece of infrastructure for disastrous events (Novelo-Casanova & Suarez, 2011) for it to be compromised during a low threat event.

Many Caymanians still mourn the loss of this key architectural design statement, coupled with the poor infrastructural issues keep the population disappointed. This case study highlights the loss of Caymanian architectural design with the natural materials, decorative forms, and bright colours.

Figure 48

NRA tackling flooding after deluge.



Note. Cayman News Service, 2019, Video Screenshot.

On top of this ORIA was reportedly overcrowding (Jewel, 2014), with travellers suffering delays and discomfort while locals were worried about the ecological damage of the lack of consideration and planning towards climate change according to Cayman News (2022).

Figure 49

CITA stresses need for well managed airport



Note. Cayman News, 2019, Photograph.

Chapter 6: Tension Between Tourist-Centric Development and the Needs of Local Communities

6.1 Tourism as a Key Economic Driver

Tourism is the primary economic driver of the Cayman Islands, with a forecasted 4.0% increase in 2022 (Fitch Solutions, 2023). With its pristine beaches, crystal-clear waters, and world-renowned diving sites, the islands attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, ranging from stayover tourists, business tourists, cruise ship passengers, and a recent spike in medical tourism. As a result, tourism has been a major catalyst for architectural development, especially in the hospitality sector. The demand for upscale hotels, exclusive resorts, and luxury condominiums along the famous Seven Mile Beach and other prime coastal areas has driven significant construction activity.

These tourism-centric developments are designed to meet the needs of wealthy international visitors, with an emphasis on modern amenities, and luxury accommodations. The rapid expansion of tourism-related real estate has transformed the islands' skyline, contributing to the rise of luxury developments that are often not accessible to the local population. The architectural evolution in these areas is, therefore, driven by the pursuit of economic gain from tourism, often sidelining the needs and concerns of the local communities.

6.2 Government Priorities

The Cayman Islands government has prioritized tourism-driven projects as a central focus of its development strategy. The government has consistently allocated significant funding to infrastructure and initiatives that support the tourism industry. This is shown as they awarded US\$12.3 million to US creative agencies Grey and Praytall to develop Cayman's luxury vacation destination brand (Ragoonath, 2024) while the number of individuals under the NAU (Needs Assessment Unit) is at an all time high and continues to rise (Cayman News Service, 2024). This highlights a misalignment of priorities. While tourism is seen as vital for economic growth, critics argue that this emphasis on tourism development often comes at the expense of local needs.

Government officials have praised the economic benefits of tourism-related developments, pointing to job creation, foreign investment, and increased revenues from taxes and fees. However, the concentration of resources and policy focus on attracting high-end tourists has led to growing concerns about the equitable distribution of development benefits across the islands' diverse population.

There are many policies in place to aid Caymanians with this current living crisis, such as the National Housing Development Trust accepting applications for the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) Program and the National Housing Development Trust. Many of these low-income housing programs are located on the far side of the island,

requiring a car to travel to and from work, with a lack of public transport the lives of the low-income population are still at risk.

6.3 Public Outcry and Local Concerns

The cost of living has risen all over the globe, becoming a problem for most. The Cayman Islands has become increasingly impossible for the low-class residents as a single person's monthly cost is on average CI\$4,701 (Expatistan, n.d.) while the minimum wage has been steady at \$6 an hour (Labour Law, 2016), requiring over 26 hours a day to meet the cost average, which is impossible. With the lack of enforcements on landlords price gouging, even with The Residential Tenancies Act (Residential Tenancies Law, 2009), many renters are forced out, with nowhere to go.

Many locals have complained about this matter with letters being sent to government officials and newspapers (A. Jackson, personal communication, June 4, 2021) with the pressure of trying to stay afloat financially many have to leave island, some ending up homeless and helpless (Cayman Islands Human Rights Commission, n.d.)

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Being highly motivated, aware, and educated on this topic point, I was able to further my knowledge, being able to look at this problem from a research and information point of view was very intriguing with the initial question of 'Has it Really Gotten Better?' I went into this allowing the possibility for my opinions to change.

The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that the rapid architectural and infrastructural development of the Cayman Islands has been largely driven by the tourism industry, with profound effects on the islands' economy, visual culture, and environment. The shift towards high-end, tourism-centric developments has led to the marginalization of the local community. As evidenced in Chapter 3.10 the main focus shifted completely to high-income projects that have largely disregarded the islands previous design styles.

In light of these concerns, this dissertation calls for a re-evaluation of the country's development policies. A more unbiased approach is required—one that balances the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of local ecosystems and cost of living. Moving forward, it is imperative that urban planning and architectural development take into consideration the socioeconomic disparities highlighted in this research. Policies must be created that ensure affordable housing, accessible infrastructure, and fair economic opportunities for local communities, ensuring that development does not come at the expense of the people who call the Cayman Islands home. The need for sustainable growth and inclusive development has never been more urgent, as the islands strive to maintain their unique cultural heritage while adapting to the demands of a rapidly changing global economy. While the study provides valuable insights, the scope of the research was limited by the availability of certain historical data and a limit of words, which may not fully capture the broader trends. Future research could explore the role of community-based initiatives in shaping sustainable urban development or examine how other Caribbean islands have navigated the balance between modernization and cultural preservation.

In conclusion, while tourism-driven architectural development has brought economic growth to the Cayman Islands, it has also created significant challenges for the local community, including rising living costs, inadequate housing, and social displacement. The growing tension between catering to high-end visitors and meeting local needs must be addressed. For a sustainable future, development should prioritize the welfare of the local population, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are shared fairly and that the islands' unique heritage and communities are preserved. Without this shift, the Cayman Islands risk undermining the very foundation of its social and cultural identity.

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