

Island Café Leaps Over Environmental, Legal Hurdles

Morada Bay Beach Café & Bar
Islamorada, Florida
Grand Award, Division I

Turning an old concrete plant in the Florida Keys into an island paradise restaurant took more than a great concept—it required a complete transformation. The Morada Bay Beach Café & Restaurant paid careful attention to the context of native architecture and the environment while observing strict state development requirements in order to meet its goals.

Many entertainment and dining facilities in this region are pompous “tourist traps” which fail to consider the rich native building traditions of the Keys. The owners of the project wanted to create a special sense of place and pay homage to those traditions in their restaurant. Their hope was also to create greater interest in the development of a town that centered on these ideals.

Environmental concerns were paramount. The 3.5-acre waterfront site had been severely stripped of its vegetation while being used as a commercial concrete plant. Not only did the owner want to bring back a thickly vegetated area to set a stage for the restaurant, but was required to do so in order to proceed with development. Fully re-foresting the area requires transplanting numerous trees and will therefore take a long time because of limited supply. This effort will continue over the long term, even as the main part of the project is complete.

In addition to the site’s surround-

ings, state growth restrictions meant that the architects and builders needed to cooperate frequently with government planners. By demolishing the old buildings on the site and only replacing the square footage that was removed, the laws were met and a highly sustainable site was achieved. This commitment to the letter and spirit of the laws was certainly a factor that allowed the project to move ahead with its original intentions.

The building itself uses metal roofing and brightly painted wood shutters that recall the brilliance of local flowering plants. Natural materials are used for all public walkways, including brick pavers, pea gravel, wood chips and sand. Decks have palm-thatched roofs. The materials blend in with the tropical surroundings, cause minimal environmental impact and help create the impression that the café has been in place for a long time.

Energy conservation is a critical concern in the consistently hot and humid climate of the Florida Keys. Large wraparound verandas create a smooth transition from ceiling fan-cooled outdoor spaces to the air conditioned interior. Clerestory windows allow minimal electric use in the daytime by letting in maximum light while also exhausting hot air gathering at the top of the ceiling.

The restaurant has been a tremendous success, receiving attention locally and in the national media. Its special atmosphere is attracting the kind of clientele sought by the venture, and patronage has far exceeded original estimates. With an ambiance that takes patrons away to a simple and vibrant island lifestyle, the Morada Bay Beach Café is the exciting result of respect for traditional buildings and the needs of the environment.

