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Reversed historic house museum: *Yugodom* rental apartment in Belgrade

Introduction

The phenomena we are trying to explain in this paper are closely connected to the particularities of the contemporary society, often labeled as a digital era or information age. Characterized by the evolution of the modern capitalism as global political and cultural system (Castells, 2011a) and globalization as a process based on and relying upon the development of the new technologies and new forms of communication (Stegar & James, 2010), Digital era brings forward consumerism as a dominant cultural distinction (James & Szeizman, 2010), where cultural sides of consumption are more important than the consumption conditioned by production (Featherstone, 1991). Another important aspect of the contemporary world is its networking dimension, which is one of the defining characteristics of the Information Age. Although networks are an old model of human interaction, digital networking technology „powered social and organizational networks in ways that allowed their endless expansion and reconfiguration, overcoming the traditional limitations of networking forms of organization to manage complexity beyond a certain size of the network” (Castells, 2011b: xviii). The backbone of such expansive and extensive networking is the internet and, although not being new and recent phenomenon (internet started in 1969), an ever-expanding base of users is easily identified – almost half of the world’s population in 2015 (46.4%) has internet access, which is an 832.5% growth since the year 2000 (IWS, 2016). The evolution of internet and its usage has been extensively debated and is out of the scope of this paper. However, since 2005 a buzzword *Web 2.0* began indicating processes that shaped the most common contemporary usage of internet through “architecture of participation” – a process in which user also was at the same time the creator of content that has been consumed; in another words a system that “consumes and remixes data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others” (O’ Reilly, 2007: 17).

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The new age of the internet (*Web 2.0*) where users were trusted to simultaneously be creators and developers of the primary content³ was quickly epitomized in the term *Sharing*, for which one of the rare studies of the phenomena claims to be a constitutive activity of Web 2.0 (John, 2012). The same author goes further to suggest that not only new ways of using the verb were induced by the dense-networking capacity of the Web 2.0, but that it shed new light onto the social life off-line too. The word changed connotations from negative to positive “which suggests that the idea of sharing has grown in popularity in spheres beyond Web 2.0” (ibid, 176) and introduced new ones - “terms such as ‘share your world’ or ‘share your life’ did not appear before” (ibid, 178). The concept of sharing spread well beyond mixing internet data by content consumers/creators and found its most tangible form in the sphere called *Sharing economies*.

Sharing economies – rent out your room, boat or museum

Sharing economies (also known as *collaborative consumption*) represent a new form of socio-economic relations “which operate without money changing hands and whose goal, by and large, is not to make its participants richer” (ibid: 179), although, recent developments indicate that the concept can prove to be bringing lucrative opportunities (Gaskins, 2010). The concept has been widely discussed, praised and criticized (Benkler, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Hamari et al, 2015), but it is notable that the phenomenon was born in the Internet Age (Belk, 2013), that challenges the notions of property and ownership (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), and includes individuals renting out their underused assets, from clothing or accessories to homes and vehicles. Some authors would even suggest that sharing economies, in conjunctions with Web 2.0 are facilitating the transition into the postcapitalist era, where *consumer goods* are becoming *profit goods* under certain conditions and helped by the technological advances (Mason, 2015). The paradigmatic platform of successful and well-received sharing economy is *Airbnb*, a website that allows travelers to rent accommodation from ordinary people – residents of named accommodation. Initially intended as affordable and hip alternative to hotels and hostels, Airbnb nowadays includes most unusual accommodation and housing units, including airplanes, boats, lighthouses, even islands (Garun, 2013; Poggio, 2015). Since its launch in 2009, Airbnb has been booking millions of room nights annually for more than 60 million users through 2 million listings in 57000 locations worldwide (Smith, 2016). Although renting

³ Such practices are not error-free processes. For further details, see: Parikka, J., & Sampson, T. D.

privately owned accommodation as tourist lodging has been known for a very long time, as in cases of XVIII century Grand Tours (Black, 1985), it was the Web 2.0 and digital technologies that turned such practice into a game of high numbers (Guttentag, 2015; Shelly & Frydenberg, 2011). The rise to prominence in global hospitality industry and steady growth of Airbnb has attracted much popular and academic attention, but not without underlining the threats and challenges – legal and taxation issues, health & safety concerns and disruptive effects on the housing market of the destination (Geron, 2013; Patel, 2015; Guttentag, 2015). Its benefits and negative effects towards the receptive destination are yet to be fully researched, but as Yglesias (2012) suggests that “short term rentals should serve as a reminder that visitors aren’t best regarded as a resource to be milked by hotels” indicates that accommodation is just one of the segments through which a destination sees benefit from tourism.

The popularity of Airbnb accommodation services is found, amidst other, in trust and reputation of the host that can be achieved via users’ comments, low(er) prices in comparison to hotels, and homey feeling preferred by some travelers (Guttentag, 2015). For the purpose of this paper, it is noteworthy that one of the main reasons for choosing Airbnb over a standard accommodation services (hotel, hostel, etc) lies in the wish for obtaining more of a ‘local experience’ – “The experience of living in a residence also offers guests the chance to have a more ‘local’ experience by living more like a local, interacting with the host or neighbors, and possibly staying in a ‘non-touristy’ area” (ibid, 1197). This reflects the concept of ‘black region’ by MacCannell (1973) in which tourists’ wish for more authentic, local experience in a destination is explained. By staying in an environment that would otherwise be occupied by a local resident and by sharing the elevator/staircase/inner courtyard of the building, tourists are approaching more local experiences. It has also been documented that having a direct contact with the local population is as important as the monetary factor (Liedtke, 2011), while another survey brings forward the topic of authenticity and ‘perspective of the inhabitants’ as equally important as other driving factors, when deciding to engage in sharing economy in hospitality sector, namely Airbnb (Stors & Kagermeier, 2015).

It is precisely the abovementioned plethora of phenomena, including technological innovations, shifts in consumers and tourists’ priorities and higher demand for ‘authenticity’ that laid fertile ground for the emergence of what will here be suggested as *Reversed house museum*.

Historic house and stay-over museums

In the era of high digitalization and massive technological development, people's needs for new and innovative ways of experiencing the world around them are rapidly changing and growing. Simple and innocent observation of landscapes, objects and events is unthinkable. More engaging, participative experiences are something practically a must in the 21st century. Although museums conceptually represent something old and traditional, their managers are quite aware of the mentioned changes and are striving to follow them. Special focus is on visitors' need of getting deeper into direct contact with history and heritage. That is why most of the traditional museums' exhibitions are nowadays perceived as conservative and non-engaging, as unimaginative and not interesting anymore. Even classical museums (with fine-art exhibitions) have been changing in that sense and modernizing quite a lot lately. However, it is not always technological advances that cause new museological approaches; another form of history and heritage presentation is emerging as very effective, while being simultaneously innovative, engaging, unpretentious and quite interesting for the visitors – the house museums.

The advantage of house museums is primarily found in their distinctive possibility to evoke history by putting the visitor into direct contact with it. The specific blend of ties between personal memory and collective remembrance in house museums is produced through the combination of cultural images which deliver perception in addition to knowledge. As far as experience and perception in the lens of authenticity are concerned, house museums are practically never contested, although they carry the aura of "true reality" (Risnicoff de Gorgas, 2011) as there was someone that actually lived in that house. However, no matter how concerned with direct links to the objects or people they narrate about, house museums are, after all, spaced that *represent* certain motives from the past, and as such are always indirect and intermediary.

History does not happen only in time, it happens in space as well, suggests Schlögel (2009), and adds that the *where* of history is just as important as the *when*. When pondering on the cultural relations toward the living space, it is necessary to include the spatial introspection, not only temporal or personal – "the history of the houses are sometimes more interesting than the life of a person. Houses outlive people and are often witnesses of different generations" (ibid). Pinna in his work explains that historic houses draw the attention and importance not only

by exposed objects and by their significance, but also by the idea they create about the people who lived there and the lives that circulated those objects (Pinna, 2001).

Maybe one of the crucial concepts, when historic houses are concerned, is the concept of *metaphorical spirit of the place*, (Van Mensch, 2011) where the interaction between three layers of the historic house - *physical properties, function and significance, and context* is seen as the basis for visitor's perception of the property and where the authenticity that visitors perceive is closely related to trust. On the other hand, Van Mensch recognizes that our experience of a historic house is set by various parameters, among which *physicality* links us to the very house - "This physicality is the result of two processes: the dynamics between the house and its inhabitants in the pre-acquisition phase of its existence, and the results of post-acquisition interpretations." Such a fact, to a certain extent, recognizes that tangible factors of the house (pre-acquisition phase) are important too.

However, house museums are not only meant to tell a story about a person or a family. These particular houses and their concepts are capable of retelling a story of an epoch, of society in such a specific way. Only historic house can unite micro and macro stories about political, cultural, artistic and other knowledge and experience. (Pavoni, W.D.). This argument will be quite applicable to the case study further in the text.

Step further in the rapprochement between museums, their exhibitions and visitors is a possibility to stay over. Many museums worldwide had started with this initiative a long time ago, realizing how exciting this experience for visitors might be. Usually, the offer stands for school children, but many of them, provide programs for adults too (London's Natural History Museum, British Museum, American Museum of Natural History, and many others worldwide). Besides museums, sleepover became a practice in abandoned prisons, sports clubs, replicas of old ships, zoo parks, etc. There is a variety of possibilities, from simple stay-over to excursions and various events organization. The famous movie "Night at the Museum" from 2006, definitely contributed to planetary excitement about spending the night at such a place.

Yugodom – rental apartment in Belgrade

Previous arguments bring forward the concept of a house museum in its traditional form and the idea of stay over museums, with certain remarks important to our case study. However,

in this paper, we will present the example of a particular model that we named *reversed historic house museum*. This model combines the above-mentioned classical historic house museum and the idea of stay-over museum by creating a certain synergy - a rental house furnished and renovated as a museum. It is important to mention that this is a space where no famous historical figures have ever lived, nor did anything historically significant ever occur. On the contrary, the place of *reversed house museum* is invented from a vernacular space with the idea of recalling a certain memory, but only through design, ambient and/or another constructed and not inherited property. That is why a term *reversed* has been introduced.

Yugodom (literary translated from Serbian: *Yugoslav home*) is an Airbnb rental apartment located in the old neighborhood of Dorcol in the Belgrade city center. It belongs to the 1960's modernist style apartment building, erected by the Yugoslav state for the JNA (Yugoslav National Army) officials and their families. Both back then and now, these buildings are considered to be strong and solid and their quality and high standards are often understood in relation to the strength of the Yugoslav state (Le Normand, 2014). What makes *Yugodom* distinctive and worth of both touristic and research attention is its interior design, focused on mid-century Yugoslav aesthetics.

In the words of Mario Milaković, owner, founder and curator,

“Yugodom is a collection of furniture, decorations, souvenirs and similar items from the period of the Yugoslav mid-century moderna, situated in a flat of a 1960s military-constructed building in Dorćol area of Belgrade. The furniture is authentic and from the era, made in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The building is authentic, the flat is authentic. Yugodom is also authentic, but it is original creation, not an replica or imitation of some old exYU flat; it is rather a flat/museum/art exhibition/design collection that is strongly influenced by selected aspects of SFRY aesthetics, art, design and history” (in Rahatlokum, 2015).

Yugodom is labeled as *living museum* and is very much advertised as such and perceived as such by the media and its guests⁴. Furthermore, Mario explains that he does not feel as an hotelier or as an art curator – “I combined the museum with the rental-apartment, I actually invented for myself a new category. Unlike conventional museums, the guests can touch everything, sleep in the beds, experience the world as it was, not just behind glass cases. What you will experience and feel here will definitely be stronger than distant exhibition”. (in Vrana, 2015).

This atmosphere allows guests to step back in time and to experience the story of a country still carved in the memory of many Yugoslavs, but others too. However, the aesthetic assemblage of Yugodom, its exhibits/household items that focus on the visual while leaving out the contextual (namely ideological and political aspects of the era it refers to) certainly tend to cater for the feelings of nostalgia, feeling of loss of something that never existed, or as something that one didn't think one had lost (Boym, 2002).

With these preliminary sketches of the apartment and the building, we will retrace the above/mentioned frame of traditional historic houses in our endeavors to explain both the *Yugodom*'s attractiveness and emerging phenomena of *reversed house museums*.

This rental apartment might be classified as a *living museum*, with a role in preserving and presenting aesthetic heritage. *It is* a stay over museum designed as a Yugoslav retro home that exhibits art and design collections of a mid-century modern furniture and home décor. It is not an authentic apartment from mid-century, but an apartment furnished with authentic pieces from the era and with the tag ‘Made in Yugoslavia’. Therefore, the matter of MacCannells`staged authenticity concept (1973) is not even questionable here due to the awareness of visitors about the above-mentioned clarification. MacCannell's argues that tourists who seek authentic objects/places are usually already prepared about the place they are visiting. That might refer to the never-ending popularity of the mid-century Yugoslavia, and the fact that Yugodom attracts mostly fans of Yugoslav modern design. However, it is a comfortable rental home designed to welcome all visitors of Belgrade, interested in having a unique experience of stepping back in the time of ex-Yugoslavia.

⁴Yugodom is receiving high level of international and domestic media attention from the moment it opened its doors. Full press clipping with visual, video and printed materials is available on the Yugodom Facebook page www.facebook.com/yugodom.

The reversed house museum is therefore characterized by several set of particularities:

- It is a space that is entirely constructed in the present, does not bear any factual links to the past occurrences of that space and does not convey a story based on the past of that space.
- It is a space envisioned and constructed with other-than-museum purpose. Historical narrative is consumed in parallel with the core service of the space – in the case of Yugodom it is rental-apartment providing logging services as well as house-museum experience.
- It is branded, marketed, recognized and most importantly consumed as a house museum space; a space that conveys a historical narrative based on the set of artifacts that are allocated to that space, not historically, reflecting the spatial-social continuum, but rather purposefully in the present.
- It is a space that attracts its visitors in other-than-museum ways and usually does not charge “exhibition” fees but profits from another activity of the space.
- Is is a space usually, but not exclusively, owned and run by non-institutional entity.
- It is a space that heavily relies upon the contemporary characteristics of World Wide Web and its sharing components – Web 2.0 and Sharing economies in the ways it attracts its visitors.

In another words, *reversed house museum* reflects the postmodern practice of border blurring, where sleeping is combined with museum-experience and where the historic house setting is merely constructed setting, bearing no particular link to the actual history of the space. In that sense, the concept is echoing the Baudrillard’s (1994) third stage of simulation in which the presentation is detached from the reality to that extent, that it does not have an original anymore. In case of Yugodom, the apartment/exhibition is not representing any particular ex-Yugoslav apartment but rather form an aesthetic pastiche that produces a historical narrative.

Reversed house museums lack some of the core characteristics of traditional house museums, characteristics that are at their basis and constitute the framework within which they are managed and consumed. Contrary to the above mentioned particularities, *Reversed house museums* do not operate on the level that takes into an account the pre-acquisition phase; the whole layer that constitutes the experiences of the house relating to the period before it became

musealised is absent. There is actually no *where* from the Schlögel's maxime we examined earlier on, no *physicality* that predestines a house (or any other space as a matter of fact) for certain historical narrative. With this in mind, we might ask ourselves do reversed house museums provide less of an experience for the visitors, or the social framework in which they operate substitutes that in a proper way.

Sourcing further inspiration from Van Mensch's (2011) comments of historic houses as heterotopian spaces in the Foucauldian terms, we agree that "it is not the house where something has happened, or where somebody has lived. It is the house that is interpreted and accordingly presented as the representation of the house where something has happened, or where somebody has lived." In the case of *reversed house museums*, we would argue, the definition would be "it is a house where nothing has happened and nobody had lived. It is a house that is constructed, made available and consumed as one that is interpreted and accordingly presented as the representation of the house where something has happened, or where somebody has lived".

Various and numerous international guests of this particular Airbnb accommodation unit appreciate owner's efforts and recognize his ideas. That is why Yugodom rapidly became famous and highly evaluated by guests, tourism professionals, national and international press. Yugodom represents an excellent example of the ways hospitality and museum industries are articulated into a space that offers much sought-after blend of experiences. In that sense, we expect the global increase of reversed historic houses and we strongly encourage the professional and academic community to keep close attention to the developments in this field and produce new and relevant knowledge regarding many open questions that remain behind this paper, namely those that would question the authenticity, ideological background and other socio-cultural aspects of reversed historic houses' emergence on the global market.

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