KEY ISSUES ON TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND SHARING ECONOMIES: IMPLICATIONS ON TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract:

Contemporary digital age is relying upon constant changes in the ways new technologies are used in forming authentic forms of networking. Taking into the account the development of sharing economies and their impact on the hospitality accommodation market, this paper will bring forward the processes through which informal short-stay accommodation units are articulated into museum spaces that bring multiple benefits to tourism destinations.

Keywords:

sharing economy, Airbnb, museum, accommodation units.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we attempt to shed light on certain cultural practices that are tightly linked to the specificities of the modern society, often identified as Digital era or Information age. As Castells (2011a) notes, it is considered to be the era of contemporary capitalism in both political and cultural dimensions, characterized by globalization as a trend heavily relying on the advancements of technology and networking (Steger & James, 2010), with consumerism practices in its core (James & Szeman, 2010). Another noteworthy feature of the contemporary society is networking, articulated through various systems of socio-technological practices that set the tone of the contemporary life. Though networks are well established forms of communication, digital networking „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 pillar of such development is the Internet and its constant expansion – nearly half of the world's population (46.4%) in 2015 had Internet access, which represents the staggering growth of 832.5% since the beginning of the 21st century (IWS, 2016). The ways the Internet has been evolving and has been used over time has triggered lots of debates and is not in the focus of this presentation. However, since 2005, a new phrase Web 2.0 started representing particular forms of Internet development via an "architecture of participation" – a process in which the user simultaneously creates the content being used[1]; in other words a system that "consumes and remixes data from multiple sources,

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1   For the downfalls of such a system see: Parikka, J. & Sampson, T. D. (2009).

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including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others" (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 17).

The new chapter in the Internet development was quickly symbolized in the word *Sharing*, a practice that soon became a constitutive activity of Web 2.0 (John, 2012). The term's connotations fluctuated from negative to positive and *Sharing* enriched the vocabulary of the off-line environments with new meanings - "terms such as 'share your world' or 'share your life' did not appear before" (ibid, 178). The notion of *Sharing* quickly included numerous activities outside the data mixing frameworks among Internet users and found its most tangible form in the sphere called *Sharing economies.*

Sharing economies symbolize new ways of socio-economic networking – powered by the revolutionary breakthroughs in internet technology, Sharing economies represent a point in which the internet networks do not connect only people with people, but people with physical objects. Sharing economies do not necessary include monetary exchange (ibid, 179), one might trade in knowledge, skills, social reach and other resources valuable in contemporary society (Gorenflo, 2010). Regardless of the currency types, these networks can certainly be seen as profitable environments (Gaskins, 2010). This phenomenon was subjected to wide and constructive analysis and criticism (Benkler, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Hamari *et al.*, 2015), but it is important to note that Sharing economies sprang out during the Internet age (Belk, 2014), that they reconceptualize the classical understanding of property and ownership (Botsman & Rogers, 2010) and include individuals renting out their underused assets, from personal belongings, to vehicles, vessels and real estate. Certain authors understand Sharing economies as transitional stage towards post-capitalist environments in which *consumer goods* are becoming *profit goods* (Mason, 2015). Well suited illustration of successful Sharing economy is Airbnb, a web page that enables travelers to rent logging from "ordinary people", owners and inhabitants of the logging that is being rented. Initially envisioned as substitute for traditional forms of accommodation, Airbnb today offers various forms of places to stay, including tree houses, discarded airplanes, lighthouses, even whole islands (Garun, 2013; Poggio, 2015). Airbnb started operating in 2009 and since then has booked millions of room nights for 60+ million users in 2 million listings over 57000 locations worldwide (Smith, 2016). The ways of subletting privately owned accommodation has been known for quite some time now, most famous cases are in connection to the "Grand Tour" (Black, 1985) in the 18th century, but it is Web 2.0 and new networking technologies that transformed such a practice into a world-wide phenomenon (Guttentag, 2015; Shelly & Frydenberg, 2011). Various benefits and downsides of Airbnb platform have already been debated (Geron, 2013; Patel, 2015; Guttentag, 2015), and the impact of such a practice on the destination itself remains to be fully investigated. Nevertheless, as Yglesias (2012) suggests - "short term rentals should serve as a reminder that visitors aren't best regarded as a resource to be milked by hotels" – brings to our attention the impacts a booking system might impose on the destination and its traditional stakeholders (namely accommodation providers).[2]

Airbnb is popular among the tourists for many reasons, but for the purpose of this paper one of the most significant is the "homey" feeling preferred by certain travellers (Guttentag, 2015). Renting out a residents' living space via Airbnb is seen as an attempt to achieve closer relationship with the destination itself. By logging in privately owned space, space that would otherwise be occupied by a resident of the receptive destination, by sharing communal spaces of the building with other residents, travelers try to reach intimate and direct relationship with the destination and live authentic local experiences. Liedtke's (2011) findings suggest that having a direct contact with the locals is a factor as important as a monetary aspect when choosing Sharing economy accommodation, while Stors & Kagermeier (2015) bring forward the authenticity and "perspective of the inhabitants" as one of the key factors that shape travelers' wish to engage in Sharing economy accommodation.

We are of the opinion that the above mentioned mix of contemporary processes, including changes in technology, shifts in tourists' priorities and wish for achieving higher level of "locality" laid fertile ground for the diversification of tourist offer of the receptive destination, especially in the ways micro museums and Airbnb spaces collaborate and produce new narratives and experiences.

RESULTS

The significance of micro-museums for various aspects of the tourism destination has been widely discussed; most important findings originate from museum management and destination management disciplines. Having in mind that this paper takes into introspection house museums, spaces that narrate about the past by employing artifacts and processes in connection to the residents of the named houses, we consider short remarks about the house museums necessary.

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2   In that way, one should understand various activities that local communities undertake in order to tackle problems caused by sharing economy platforms. Most notable is the case of Berlin's City Senate efforts to normalize the disrupted housing market by banning short-term rentals such as Airbnb (Oltermann, 2016).

The advantages of house museums are mainly identified in their particular ability to facilitate more direct contact between visitors and the historical narrative by intertwining personal memory and collective remembrance. Although house museums carry the aura of "true reality", as someone had actually lived in that house (Risnicoff de Gorgas, 2011), these spaces are never outside the scope of authenticity analysis. No matter how directly objects, persons or images from the past are being displayed and narrated about in house museums, they are always subjected to the representations, and as such are inherently indirect and intermediary.

Past does not occur only in time, it happens in space too, suggests Schloegel (2009) while adding that the history of houses is sometimes more important than the lives of their inhabitants. Historic houses are not sourcing their attractiveness only by exhibiting artifacts that belonged to the object, but by creating the ideas about the people that lived there and occurrences that took place within its spaces (Pinna, 2001). Noteworthy is the concept of *metaphorical spirit of the place*, put forward by Van Mensch (2011) in which a tripartite model consisting of *physical properties, function and significance,* and *context* is considered basic for understanding the perception of the property that visitors experience while *in situ* and as amalgam of the perceived authenticity of the historic house. Out of these three, *physicality* connects 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" (ibid, 13). Echoing the mentioned notes, we would like to emphasize that by employing the historic narrative, house museums do not offer only introspections into the lives of selected individuals from the past, but merge micro and macro stories about wider social relations – political, cultural, economic and other spheres of life of the destination (Pavoni, W.D.).

Further step in understanding complex connections between museums, its visitors and tourism destination is the possibility of *staying-over* in the very museum premises. Featured by many of the world's most significant museums (London's Natural History Museum, British Museum[3] *etc.*) *stay-over* practice is tailored for both children and adult visitors. This form of amalgamative experiences in which museums act as accommodation providers will be of importance for the particular type of house museums presented herein.

By outlining several important notes on the house museums and cases of stay-over museums, we intended to set the path towards the analysis of the model that brings Airbnb accommodations and museum spaces in close cooperation. This model combines the abovementioned forms of traditional house museums and the idea of museum spaces as suitable logging arrangements by setting a particular kind of synergy – short term rental apartments furnished as a museum. These are the spaces where no famous individual from the past lived nor something significant from the past happened. Quite the opposite - they are everyday spaces arranged in such a manner as to evoke certain memory, but only by employing constructed and not-inherent elements of the named spaces.

Yugodom is a short term Airbnb rental apartment set in the historic part of Belgrade, in the neighborhood named Dorćol. What sets Yugodom apart and makes it interesting for both academic and tourism introspection is interior design, focused entirely on the aesthetics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. While explaining what Yugodom represents, Mario Milaković, the founder and curator, underlines:

"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 the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The building is authentic, the flat is authentic. Yugodom is also authentic, but it is an original creation, not a replica or imitation of some old ex-YU flat; it is rather a flat/museum/art exhibition/design collection that is strongly influenced by the selected aspects of SFRY aesthetics, art, design and history" (Rahatlokum, 2015).

Yugodom is branded as a living museum, advertised as such and received as one by both guests and domestic and worldwide media[4]. Moreover, Mario underlines that he does not feel as a hotelier or 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". (Vrana, 2015).

Taking into account the descriptions of Yugodom and the abovementioned theoretical notes on the developments of the Internet and networking technologies, sharing economy, micro museums and museums

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3   The offer in the British Museum is particularly informative and is available on their webpage: http://www.timeout.com/london/events/museum-sleepovers.

4   Full press clippings on Yugodom are available at www.facebook.com/yugodom.

as stay-over spaces, we would like to point out to several particularities of Airbnb house museums.

DISCUSSION

This apartment for short stay could be considered as a stay-over museum with a particular role in maintaining and presenting aesthetical heritage of the previous epoch. Well received as museum space, Yugodom performs within Belgrade's tourism destination by articulating a historical narrative, predominantly by exhibiting art and design collections from the time of socialist modernism. The apartment itself is not an authentic apartment from the 1960s, it is rather an apartment that has been furnished with authentic pieces of furniture from the era in which the space has been codified and with artifacts that carry „Made in Yugoslavia" label. MacCannell (1973) suggests that tourists in pursuit for spaces and experiences of high authenticity are mainly prepared and informed in advance about the places they visit. Bearing this in mind, the issue of contested authenticity within Yugodom is of no concern, as visitors are well informed about all aspects of the space and it is up to them to decide if they shall spend their nights in a museum or an apartment or an art gallery or something else. Yugodom is not open for museum-like visits, it is a space that is available only after accommodation booking has been confirmed – a practice that is much more hotel-like than museum-like. By maintaining such business practice, that is – by not performing in the way traditional museums do (sell entrance tickets, make guided tours *etc.*), Yugodom maintains the necessary level of spatial ambiguity needed for the guests to decide whether they are accepting the museum narrative or merely sleep in a well-designed rental apartment.

Airbnb house museums are entirely constructed in the present and carry no connections to any intrinsic links to the past they narrate about. They are constructed as profit-based rental apartments with museum character being subordinated to the initial idea – successful tourism accommodation. Airbnb house museums are seen as museum spaces and as such, they convey certain historical narratives, narratives based on the contemporary constructions. They rely heavily on the contemporary internet usage, particularities of Web 2.0, economy of sharing and they make profit not by selling entrance tickets and souvenirs, but by charging the accommodation rates. In terms of the ownership structure, they are mainly privately-owned and managed and have no institutional affiliations with larger museum systems.

In other words, Airbnb house museums are proper reflections of postmodern practices of border-blurring, where logging is combined with museum experiences and is merely constructed environment that has nothing in common with the historical facts related to the space it occupies. In that sense, these areas could be understood in Baudrillards's ideas of simulation (1994), in which the presentation is based on something that actually never existed. In the case of Yugodom, the apartment it occupies is not the representation of any actual apartment from the ex-Yugoslav era, but it is rather an aesthetical pastiche that produces a historical narrative.

Airbnb house museums lack some of the characteristics that define the traditional house museums, characteristics that are in the core of management and consumption of such spaces. Contrary to the above-mentioned specificities, Airbnb museums do not take into consideration the pre-acquisition phase; the whole layer that constitutes the pre- musealization experience is absent. There is no *where* from the Schloegel's maxim we mentioned, no *physical characteristics* that predestine the house for certain historical narrative. Bearing this in mind, one can rightfully raise a question as to whether Airbnb house museums offer limited experiences to their peers or whether the social framework within which they operate makes necessary corrections and supplements.

Inspired by Van Mensch's (2011) comparison of house museums to Foucauldian Heterotopias, we agree that a house museum "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" (ibid: 14). In the case of Airbnb museums that we tried to explain here, we think it would be correct to assume that those are the houses where nothing has happened and nobody has lived. Those are the houses that are 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.

CONCLUSION

Numerous international guests of this particular Airbnb house museum appreciate Mario's efforts and enjoy his ideas in both aesthetical and hotelier terms. These form the basis of Yugodom's success epitomized in high-mark reviews and comments and in media's attention, mainly in the area of tourism, design and archi-

tecture. In that sense, we expect certain rise in the number of Airbnb house museums and similar spaces that combine heterogeneous frameworks in multilayered accommodation units and we encourage further introspections in such phenomena, mainly in the directions that have not been covered herein – empirical research on the demand side, ideological and business backgrounds and other socio-cultural sides of these specific house museums and their impact on their respective tourism destinations.

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