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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploration of spatial design issues at backpacker hostels in Budapest's historic center: Informality, density, and adaptability

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-based research to achieve a deeper understanding of the spatial issues related to backpacker tourism, a booming industry in Budapest. The authors designed six backpacker hostels between 2013 and 2015, and of these, four are presently in operation. Hostels are the main infrastructures within the global network of backpacker tourism. Results from the design process revealed that the creation and operation of hostels are significantly influenced by three issues, namely, informality, density, and adaptability. These issues are negotiated on three interconnected levels: the city, the building, and the interior. The authors developed an experimental structure for dormitory spaces as a conscious reaction to these issues. This experimental structure is presented and evaluated, and further paths of development are formulated based on the results.

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1. Introduction

Budget tourism in Budapest, the Hungarian capital, has grown in popularity behind the walls of downtown historic buildings, gradually transforming the functional patterns of the existing built environment and urban infrastructure.

This phenomenon refers to the spread of bottom-up, demand-based, tourist-oriented developments in the form of hostels that cater to backpackers.

Backpacker tourism has been covered widely in various fields of research. Tourism studies have amassed plenty of information on the behavior, motivations, social interactions, and sub-types of backpacker tourists (Murphy, 2001; Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995), as well as virtuality (Paris, 2012). In management science, scholars have emphasized the importance of hostels in sustaining the global network of backpacking (O'Regan, 2010). Others have revealed factors

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that increase the effectiveness of services and operations in hostels (Borovskaya and Dedova, 2014; Oliveira-Brochado and Gamiero, 2013; Musa and Thirumoorthi, 2011).

Some of these scholars mention the spatial aspects of the backpacker phenomena in their works. Borovskaya and Dedova's work about hostels in St. Petersburg (2014) dealt briefly with the role of interior design in a hostel, whereas O'Reagan's article (2010) mentioned hostels' impact on urban spaces. Paris (2012) also negotiated spatiality, focusing on the relationship between the physical and virtual space. Timothy and Teye's work, entitled "Tourism and the Lodging Sector" (2009), dedicates a chapter to hostels, in which they introduced their users as well as summarized their history and most important features within a global perspective. Recent studies have applied the servicescape model (Bitner, 1992) to the study of hostels and demonstrated the developing interest among academics about the physical environment of hostels and their impact on guests (Rashid-Radha et al., 2016; Musa and Thirumoorthi, 2011).

Nonetheless, studies that focused on how various social, economic, and urban factors determine the spatial design process of hostels are lacking. In response to this research gap, the present study aims to provide knowledge about hostels acquired through the design process. The authors were personally involved in several hostel design projects, thus providing readers an insider's view of the hostel's development. The aim is to explore the most relevant issues that affect design, while discovering experimental methods to deal them.

In this paper, an overview of the current hostel ecosystem in Budapest from a designer point of view is presented in three levels. First, hostels in the urban area are investigated. Their urban position is characterized with informality and instability due to economic and operational issues. Second, hostels are investigated in the architectural scale. According to data, the majority of Budapest hostels occupy downtown historic apartment buildings. These apartments show great flexibility in terms of spatial redundancy (Forty, 2000), and we discuss how these hostels can adapt to that environment. Third, the interior of the hostel dormitory room are investigated. The dormitory is an area in a hostel where enhanced privacy is highly evaluated by guests, though it is aimed at providing community experience (Rashid-Radha et al., 2016). Addressing this need is an important design challenge that is discussed in this paper. Architects can contribute to the shaping of hostels mainly on the interior level. In the final part of the paper, the Hostel Cube (HC), an experimental structure developed by the authors, is introduced. HC is an interior intervention that tries to answer the issues raised at the architectural and city levels. The HC aims to adapt to the specialties of the Budapest hostel ecosystem.

2. Research by design

With regards backpacker hostels and their guests, researches in management science, tourism, and sociology use methodologies that are adequate for their own discipline. The authors of this paper come from the architectural field and actively practice architectural design. The design

process, including both planning and building phases, serves as a basis of knowledge and tool of research.

An academic discourse is ongoing, and increasing attention is paid to the possible roles of design in research, commonly referred to as Research by Design (RbD). A conference entitled "Research by Design," held at TU Delft in cooperation with the EAAE/AEEA in 2000, is regarded as an important step in the development of this discourse, because it opened discussions about notions of scientific research, design, and RbD in an international context (Dunin-Woiseth and Nilsson, 2011). Actually, RbD was first developed through Dutch practice (Hauberg, 2011).

The literature presents several approaches to RbD, which concludes that instead of employing merely traditional scientific methodologies, openness and implementation of diverse strategies are more advantageous for RbD development. The current paper follows the paradigm, whereby design and experience through design serve not only as a source of knowledge, but more importantly, as a tool and strategy for research (Verbeke, 2011).

In addition to the scientific literature, the authors' experience provides a basis of knowledge for this research. This knowledge was acquired through the design, implementation, and post-design investigation of six backpacker hostels in Budapest over a two-year period. The design process involved collecting information about backpacker hostels both in local and international contexts, consulting with several hostel managers, and learning from former projects. Integral parts of the design process included observing the operation of existing hostels through site visits, regular checking of online reviews by guests, and asking for hostel staff feedback. In this sense, the design process itself becomes a research. Conversely, the resulting design is a spatial structure, which provides limited opportunities for presenting shareable, explicit knowledge (Buchler et al., 2009). Textual work offers an opportunity to present in debatable and transferable findings during the design process. This paper aims to provide useful knowledge not only for practicing designers, but also for researchers from other disciplines dealing with backpacker tourism. Design as a research strategy is implemented to investigate the complex phenomenon of backpacker tourism and its effects on urban structures with a focus on spatial considerations. Participating in design projects is necessary to explore significant issues within the design field, particularly of hostels. Formulating the text should be regarded as a process of systematizing the knowledge obtained by design. As a result, three key urban and architectural factors that significantly characterize the backpacker phenomenon in Budapest and influence the design of hostels have emerged: informality, density, and adaptability. Throughout this paper, these factors are investigated on three interconnected levels, namely, city, building, and interior or furniture.

3. Ambiguity of defining a hostel

The hostel is a short-term accommodation focusing especially on tourists who are usually labeled as "backpackers." The hostel is an inevitable form of infrastructure and socio-spatial element of backpacking (O'Regan, 2010); however,

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