

Sense of Place, Identity and Memory as Elements of the Design for Tourism



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Abstract The design of spaces and products for tourism invests on memorable experiences and sense of place. Identity is of major significance in defining uniqueness in touristic products. It is contextual and related to local, spatial, cultural and material characteristics, and values that are reflected to the designed environment. Spaces and their elements are invested with meaning and as such are experienced by tourists through sensory, emotional, and cognitive perception. Within this process the designer has to capture the intangible and tangible values that a place and its people have to offer and transform them into the material substances that tourists experience. The conceptual development within the design process and the segmentation of the elements that the designer has to take in mind, while designing for tourism, are essential. The different scales of the designed environment, from building design to objects, stimulate the storage of information related to heritage, cultural identity and place that will be remembered by tourists and create anticipation during and after their trip. So, design affects to a great extent tourism success. The aim of this study is to clarify the relation of the above subjects to the design discipline. A number of contemporary case studies of large, medium and small scale designed products related to tourism are analysed under a semiotic perspective to justify and visualize the attempt.

Keywords Sense of place · Cultural identity · Experience design

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1 The Meaning of Design and the Realm of Designing for Tourism

Design for tourism covers a broad area of the design realm. Design research, design theory and design practice are all related to the tourism discipline. This relation is not only limited to the design of hotels, or facilities that accommodate tourist activities, but a variety of additional subjects and areas. Two-dimensional design as well as, design of services can be placed among them [1, p. 545]. However, in the present study reference will be made to the three-dimensional spatial and product design.

Scale is a design principle that will provide the axis to place the different designed spatial situations related to tourism. Urban environments, buildings and products constitute the main points in this axis. In products related to tourism we can include things used in everyday life, such as cutlery, furniture, cultural products and artifacts, souvenirs, devices, even vehicles for transportation. Buildings, both with their interior and exterior environments become a significant part in this categorization. Architectural typology, decorations, textures, colours, features, materiality, scale, and organization of areas characterize hotels, information centers, restaurants, museums, airports and stations that tourists visit. However, buildings participate and create to a great extent the urban environment where they belong. So, urban and landscape designed environment, is characterized by spatial organization, relations between built and unbuilt parts, materiality and textures, social standards of proximity, relationships between private/public, open/closed, homogeneous/heterogeneous spaces.

Designers to produce the multifaceted scales of the human made environment, have to deal also with areas significant to design such as psychology, physiology, social and behavioral sciences, cultural sciences and environmental studies and the development of technology. Designers focus to functionality, construction quality, comfort, user friendliness, accessibility and ‘readability’, however, when designing for tourists a number of additional characteristics are essential. The design background has to be informed with the latest advances in the tourism discipline and the literature related to it. There is an emerging tendency in all aspects of design, without exception tourism design, towards experience design emphasizing on understanding and stimulating the perceptions of end users [1, p. 547]. “In the context of tourism this refers to the design of experiences that tourists will have while involved with the designed products or environments; experiences that will be associated with the senses, cognition, emotions, affect, and other values and situated in different tourism contexts” [1, p. 547]. To that sense, tourism design should pay attention to specific issues that will promote and stimulate the experiences of the tourists: sense of place, uniqueness and identity, memorability.

2 On Sense of Place, Identity and Memory with Reference to Design for Tourism Case Studies

Experiencing played always an important role in tourism, but now this becomes even more evident as “memorable tourist experience is considered the new benchmark of the tourism industry” [2, p. 652]. To achieve this, sense of place, identity and memorability become abstract tools in the hands of product and spatial designers.

‘Place’ is considered to be more than a location, especially when it is discussed in relation to tourism. “Place is an amalgam of destination qualities, including landscape and architecture, history and heritage and social structures and relationships” [3, p. 221]. Therefore, any cultural experience is closely related to place, referring to a special and memorable place to which visitors feel attached, connected or belonging. It is also intrinsically linked to local identity [4] and its creation and communication is dependent on meaning that is socially constructed in a continuous process [5]. ‘Sense of place’ implies a strong place identity, provides complex experiences, triggers emotions, feelings and memories and evokes a strong attraction [6].

A successful cultural destination branding and marketing approach needs to be integrative [4]. It necessitates reading, reinforcing and promoting a strong sense of place that links past, present and future and includes cultural, historic and natural assets, tangible and intangible values and multisensory experiences. As a consequence, touristic destinations are not seen as mere cultural consumables, but as places full of meanings, that result in memorable experiences [7]. It is a significant issue to discover what makes a destination distinctive, authentic and memorable.

Place-based cultural tourism identifies, and then capitalizes on the unique cultural character and ‘sense of place’ that distinguishes one place from another [3]. “Place-based cultural tourism involves the act of placing as well as the ‘making’ of a place [3, p. 223]. Therefore, the role of the designer as a ‘space maker’ should not be underestimated. To be successful, place-based cultural tourism requires that the visitor is able to develop a sense of connection with the locale, even if only temporarily. Place-based cultural tourism is more involving, immersive and distinct from other forms of cultural tourism. It implies the visitor is in a place, not just at a place” [3, p. 223].

Enriching product design with cultural features “is a process of rethinking or reviewing cultural features and then redefining the process in order to design a new product to fit into society and satisfy consumers with via culture and esthetic” [8, p. 148]. During the design process cultural features are identified and together with necessary user and product attributes are then correlated in a design model that is further translated into the design of cultural products [8]. A ‘cultural product design model’ clarifies this process consisting of three parts: the conceptual model, the research method and the design process. In the design process the four steps of investigation, interaction, development and implementation are suggested [8, p. 148, 149].

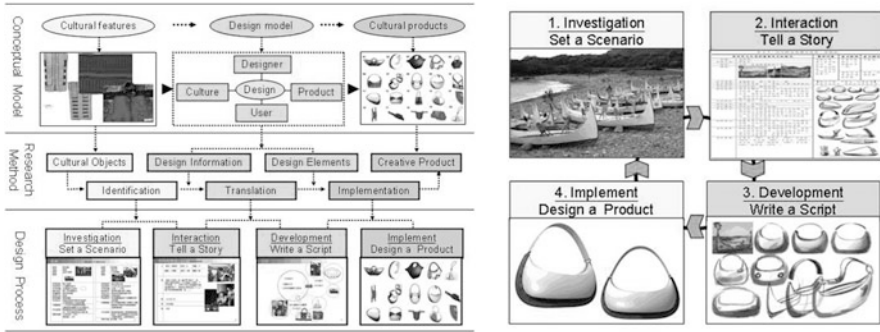


Fig. 1 Cultural product design model and design process [8]

This is exemplified through the bag design inspired by the Tao culture of Taiwan (Fig. 1). The scenario represents the aboriginal people using the pin-boat for fishing and the holy dagger to protect themselves. The scenario is translated into a modern story by transforming boat and dagger into a woman's bag with a modern alarm for self-protection. The visual vocabulary of the original design has been transferred into the final product design carrying cultural meaning [8].

According to Pallasmaa [9] "architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world and this mediation takes place through the senses". In relation to spaces and built environments vision is the sense that has a dominant role and this is even more apparent as technological development is increasingly dependent on that. Colour perception which is intrinsically related to vision has been investigated thoroughly by psychologists, ethnographers and semioticians who have investigated the links between colour concepts and colour perceptions, the effects on human psychological responses, as well as, colour meanings and preferences in different cultures [10, p. 33]. Colours, patterns, views, forms and shapes in a space provide visual experiences to users. They have to be chosen in such a way so they can satisfy as much as possible the subjective approaches of the different cultural, economic, social or age groups and at the same time to be consistent with the identity of the local culture. A combination of a contemporary background enriched with elements maintaining 'sense of place' and identity is often a successful solution.

However, visual elements are only part of the whole experience. Merleau-Ponty and Pallasmaa argue that the importance lies in the interaction of senses to create sensory architecture overcoming the mere visual understanding of built space [9, p. 5]. Therefore, a combination of senses could be the medium to achieve a balance, making space readable and memorable. The eye is the organ of distance, whereas touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection [11, p. 6]. Through touch humans approach and feel, understanding so texture, weight, density and temperature. Feelings create bonding and therefore touch can be the path to memorable designed environments and situations. Furthermore, another sense adds to the sensory map of experiencing a space. Hearing is the most incorporating and omnidirectional sense [9, p. 7]. Places are sensed and remembered because

of their sounds or the lack of them. Acoustics and background experiences create atmospheres; sounds in architecture can increase the intensity of its perception. In open spaces or in spaces with hard reflective materiality the sounds can easily turn into noises creating an unpleasant feeling that in tourists' memories will characterize the specific spaces.

Finally, smell is the sense with the most memorable associations, a fact that could be used and should be investigated when designing spaces, as these could stimulate emotions, guide or distract. Humans can smell more than ten thousand different smells [11, p. 8] which can be remembered longer than any other sensory stimulus. "The limbic system comprises a set of structures within the brain that are regarded by scientists as playing a major role in controlling mood, memory, behaviour and emotion. A smell acts spontaneously as a trigger in recalling a long-forgotten event or experience. Smell is also highly emotive and much of our emotional response to smell is governed by association" [12].

According to the above, it becomes apparent that designers have to master the effects of sensing a designed place and interpret as much as possible any specificities or preferences the end users may have. A successful interpretation towards a designed environment could evoke a pleasant memorable, even unconscious sensation and could add to an overall positive tourism experience. 'Sensation' is the encoding of detecting environmental information -such as light or sound waves- into neural energy so that the human brain can process. Sensation has begun to receive attention from academia as it can provide objective and context-specific information [13, p. 2].

As an example, the traditional 'karesansui' Zen gardens of Japan [14] inspired Kengo Kuma [14, 15] to design a new version of urban garden in the middle of sculptural environment and buildings (Fig. 2a). The designed construction offers an indirect way of being introduced to the Japanese culture. The use of similar scale, the textural properties of space, the shapes and forms inspired by Japanese tradition blended with a contemporary materiality introduced a 'sense of place' and a spatial identity which although contemporary is linked in a unique way to specific cultural values. The sensation of this space is similar to the sensation of a traditional Japanese garden.

A student's transformation of a traditional woven motif from Epirus into a patterned shade system in a small hotel in Metsovo, Greece introduces in the same way as above the delicate tangible heritage into the spatial values of the hospitality environment [14, 16] (Fig. 2b). The tangible cultural values of the locale are reinterpreted into a different application. Visual inputs inspired by the tradition, textural properties of a mass/void balance, and the sense of seeing through related to the use of incoming light became the means in the hands of the designer to create a memorable hospitality interior where 'sense of place' and sensing the place become invaluable properties.

Sensory experiences related to the design of spaces and products constitute a major part of the overall memorable tourism experiences and occur to a higher level when triggered by memories related to past experiences. The retrieval stage when the recollection of past memories takes place is equally important to the

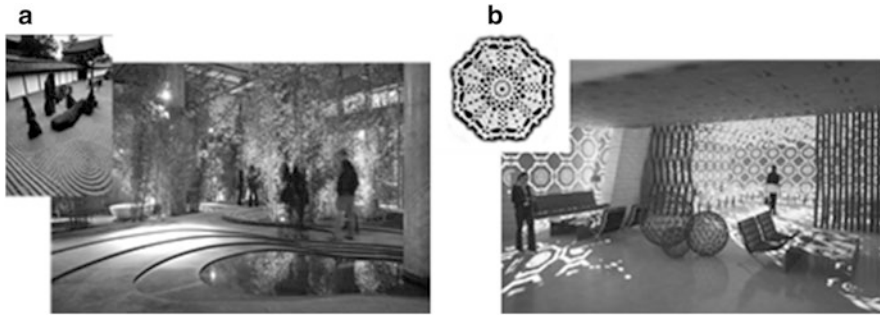


Fig. 2 (a) ‘Naturescape’ for urban stories [14, 15], (b) Hotel lobby interior [14, 16]

encoding stage when people collect the information and store it. Physical objects like memorabilia, are consciously bought to aid the remembering of experiences [17, p. 334, p. 326]. There is a significant effect of memorabilia on memory retrieval and as markers of experience [17, p. 335]. Researchers suggest that “destination managers should develop diverse memorabilia, including not only objects that belong to current souvenir typologies, but also more ordinary objects that serve a functional purpose after tourists return home” [17, p. 335]. The study also declares that those practical articles often acquire sentimental meaning; while those bought explicitly as souvenirs they often lose their sentimental value over time. As a result, a promising challenging ground opens for product designers to transform the intangible and tangible values of their cultural background into functional objects that would carry on them those values and a unique identity related to the culture.

A number of contemporary Greek product designers changed positively the indifferent Greek souvenir design of the past [18, 19]. Contemporary Greek memorabilia manage to offer a memorable connection of quality to a touristic experience. They interpret successfully icons and symbols not simply copying landmarks but using specific characteristics of the local culture and blend them with contemporary uses offering solutions to practical needs.

The ‘peripteron’ ready cut paper construction [16] refers to a concise ‘place-based’ tourism and succeeds a sense of connection to the locale involving the user with an urban construction used as symbol of locality (Fig. 3a). Involvement is additionally achieved by the mere function of the object as a toy paper construction. The white and blue ‘Atlas’ shopper [16] is an adaptive reuse of a local traditional packaging transformed into a bag (Fig. 3b). Many concepts are indirectly creating a connection with the ‘sense of place’ and the cultural identity. The blue and white colours become part of the visual connection to ‘Greekness’. The recalling of a package is obvious and the use of minimum materials is adding to an ecological intention highly appreciated by an increasing number of people. The indirect connection to oil as an authentic Greek product triggers taste and olfactory cues that constitute external influences to memory retrieval [17, p. 326]. The same is applied in the design of a variety of ‘Anamnesia’ products using an abstract

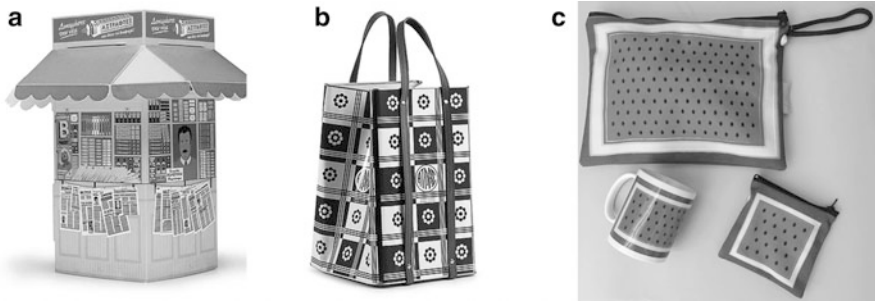


Fig. 3 Contemporary Greek souvenir design: (a) the Greek kiosk, ready cut paper construction [18], (b) Atlas shopper, olive oil tin tote bag [19], (c) Karpouzi theme souvenirs [20]

watermelon pattern as a colour decoration [19] (Fig. 3c). The objects are very contemporary, simple in design without any added decoration. However this abstract pattern immediately recalls pleasant memories that were sensed: the colours of the fresh cooling fruit, the place where the experience took place and the soothing effect. ‘Sense of place’, and identity are signified by the product.

Urban environments, buildings, interiors and products besides being aesthetically appealing, functional, designed to create pleasant sensations and created according to contemporary standards, have to be distinguishable from other similar ones and able to be connected to a specific culture and location to be memorable by tourists.

The contemporary process of globalization unified urban contexts, social lives and even cultures to some extent. Designing, respecting a local identity, could be an alternative process of stories revealed anew, not opposed to the changes of the world but adapting to them [20, p. 210]. A local or regional identity has specific economic social and cultural and topographic features referenced to a defined territory [21, p. 211]. Designers as interpreters of the local cultural contexts, should be able to explain the content of such cultures to outside world in such a way so that they will maintain a creative living present enriched by the intangible and tangible heritage values of the specific culture [21, p. 211]. A number of kiosks proposed in a student’s project to guide and serve tourists along their walks across a Greek island city used specific symbols and icons to signify the cultural identity and locality [22] (Fig. 4). The dark pink colour of bougainvillea that is one of the most common plants in Mediterranean islands became an iconic trademark both in the interior and exterior of the tourist kiosks, easily recognisable and easily memorable. Additionally, the white colour of the small kiosk buildings and the small construction scale are purposefully used to relate to the ‘sense of place’ and the Greek islands visual imagery. Textural properties complete a memorable spatial experience.

Coherent development and projection of meaning and its adaption to contemporary needs and technological progress adds value and delivers a contemporary, cultural design that is responsive, sustainable, memorable and with strong identity.

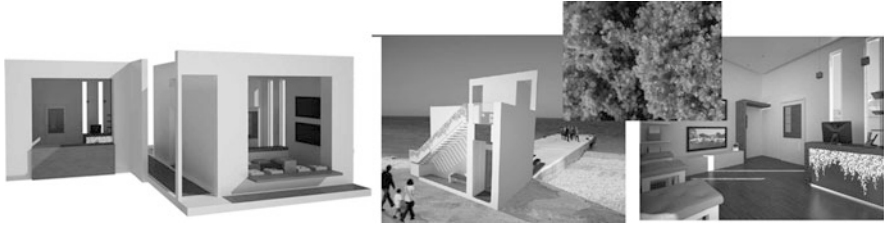


Fig. 4 Kiosks for tourist services [22]

Adding value improves touristic experience while meeting tourist expectations and creating satisfaction, but also supports the general economic, social and cultural development [8, 23].

3 Conclusions

Tourism is one of the most demanding contemporary industries worldwide with theories and practices to develop continuously. Design for tourism is consequently a significant parameter in support of stakeholders, local and national entrepreneurs, as well as tourists themselves, covering a variety of different products and spatial environments. Experience design is becoming a new benchmark in the market and therefore specific concepts, such as ‘sense of place’, identity and memorable experiences have to be further explored to widen the theoretical background for designers in the field in order to support their production towards a successful outcome.

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