Exploring Stakeholders' Perspectives on Hotel Design

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Abstract This study investigates the current defining parameters shaping hotel design and planning, exploring the views of the key stakeholders involved in hotel design. Hotel design and planning are analyzed by a number of exogenous and endogenous tourism development parameters including tourist motivation, destination socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, and institutional framework. The methodological approach used is threefold. First, the qualitative approach, involving an analysis of the relevant published scholarly literature, reveals cross-national parameters shaping the prevailing design for professional tourist accommodation developments. Second, previous studies and secondary data are analyzed to frame the case study of Athens in terms of understanding tourism development patterns and drawing upon the institutional framework and guidelines governing the tourist accommodation units design towards obtaining critical information. Third, in-depth interviews of key informants are conducted using a structured technique. The sample consists of three main groups of experts involved in the hotel design process; the owners, the managers, and the architects or designers. Findings of the current research point out to a significant number of particularly complex aspects and parameters to be complied with, in order to update and modernize tourist accommodation establishments and meet modern-day tourism essential requirements. In addition, this study goes on to argue that it is necessary to establish a deeper multilateral engagement and cooperation of the broader group of the relevant stakeholders.

Keywords Hotel design · Tourist accommodation · Sustainable design · Tourism planning · Architecture

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1   Introduction

Designing hotels is a key factor to the competitiveness of a business, especially when it combines functionality, operation, and concept (Frangou et al., 2015; Ransley & Ingram, 2001). Effective hotel designing is a complex teamwork. The owner, the manager, the architect, and the marketing team must make the best decisions, taking into consideration a number of internal and external factors (Pannell Kerr Forster Associates, 1993a).

External factors affecting the design of tourist accommodation are the predominant market demands and trends, competition, technological evolution, as well as current special circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Xyptera et al., 2021). A compound approach of the complexities of the external factors reveals the main international trends in designing tourist accommodation and infrastructure. In the last 15 years, hospitality shows rapid changes and diversity. From short-term rentals (Gourzis et al., 2019) and sustainability issues (Maleviti et al., 2012) to the continuously increasing technology impact (Vardopoulos, 2021), hotel designing never ceases to evolve (Penner et al., 2013; Rontos et al., 2016). Internal factors—at a local and national level—are related to the legislative and development framework, the specific characteristics of a place, as well as the financial dynamics and the perspectives of those involved (West & Purvis, 1992).

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the rational design of a hotel can best be achieved with the cooperation of all stakeholders, *i.e.,* the state, industry, hoteliers, and architects/designers, and with their deep understanding of the external and internal factors affecting the design (Doğan et al., 2013). The basic research questions were as follows:

- Who is involved in hotel design?
- How do those involved in hotel design perceive the influence of external factors?
- How do those involved in design address internal factors?

2   Considerations on Hotel Design

2.1   *Hotel Design Parameters*

Hotel design and planning is the process of creating a hosting space, based on specific parameters that affect the final result (West & Hughes, 1991). The term design may refer to both the exterior (Tsilika, 2021) and the interior of the building (Krstic et al., 2016; Tsilika, 2014), the furniture and other necessary equipment, the landscaping (Weller, 2008), the lighting (Mansfield, 2018; Tsilika, 2018), and the creation of the brand/image (Tsilika, 2008). It is imperative that the design and layout of a hotel

achieve the delicate equilibrium between aesthetics and practicality (Lee, 2020). Design is influenced by factors such as image, style, operating efficiency, customers' comfort, company policy, location, budgets, and logistics (Ransley & Ingram, 2001). Although the currently published scholarly literature is reporting the significance of the design dimension for both enterprises and customers (Ransley & Ingram, 2001; Sop, 2020), the parameters affecting the hotel design have not been sufficiently explored (Sop, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature review and analysis has borne fruit, revealing certain prevailing directions and patterns.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the value of design in buildings and more specifically about the role of design, aesthetics, and the atmosphere shaped in a tourist accommodation context (Alfakhri et al., 2018; Vardopoulos & Theodoropoulou, 2019). In a more techno-economical approach, the relationship among building design, user satisfaction, and property financial and marketing performance in hotels has been explored, in an effort to quantify the effect that design has on the overall business performance (Lee, 2011; Penner et al., 2013; Zemke & Pullman, 2008). Ransley and Ingram (2001) emphasized the functional and economic dimension of design, stressing that "successful" hotel design can reduce construction and maintenance costs. Pannell Kerr Forster Associates () argued that the prime requisites of hotel planning are to ensure the right interaction among the various functions within the hotel and to ensure the right allocation of space for specific areas. A series of recent studies examined the hotel design under the influence of a number of exogenous factors that shape the patterns of tourist consumption (Lee, 2020; Zemke et al., 2017, 2018), while other contributions connected the design with hotel marketing and branding strategies (Baek & Ok, 2017; Kirima et al., 2017; Piramanayagam et al., 2019). Bjorklund and King (1982) followed a consumer-based approach to assist in the design of hotels. Alfakhri et al. (2018) explored the effect of hotel design on customers' perceptions and their consumption experiences. Baek and Ok (2017) argued that design is crucial in consumers' decision-making, in terms of quality expectations and emotional arousal. Lee (2020) pointed out that hotel undertakings invest in architecture and product design to satisfy customers' motivations. Issues related to the need to adopt environmental design were also considered by previous studies (Benson, 2014; Su, 2012). Evidently, current hotel designs considered climate responsive design strategies and apply specific energy efficiency technologies and protocols (Bodach et al., 2016). Previous studies have emphasized on the effects of artificial intelligence and hotel-related robotics on an organizational level (Tussyadiah, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has set new standards in hotel design (Sanjeev & Tiwari, 2021; Xyptera et al., 2021). A series of recent studies has provided evidence supporting that the adoption of artificial intelligence and robotics at the hotels can also help towards visitors and staff of the frontline protection (Jiang & Wen, 2020). Other studies examine the endogenous parameters that influence the design of hotels; planning, buildings legislations, etc. According to Pannell Kerr Forster Associates (1993a), national and local legislation affect the size and type of development, layout, and materials, which adds to Sarantakou's (2016) concluding thoughts critically reviewing the architecture of tourist development checked against the legislative developments. Alonso and Ogle (2008) focus

on the importance of design between small- and medium-sized hospitality industry enterprises and tourism activities, while Sarantakou (2010) brings to light the effect of the profile of the business owner on the long-term viability of hotels. Understandably, hoteliers' and designers' views on hotel design have been assessed only to a very limited extent and can only be considered a first step towards a more profound or conclusive understanding of the hotel design dynamics, leaving scope for the current research (Pannell Kerr Forster Associates, 1993a; Sop, 2020).

2.2 Parameters of Current Hotel Design in Athens

Athens, the capital of Greece, is the country's most populous city and one of the world's oldest cities, with a history of more than 3,400 years. Athens is now a cosmopolitan metropolis with a population of over 3 million people, spanning an area of about 40 square kilometers. At the heart of Greece's economic, financial, industrial, political, and cultural life, Athens offers a unique blend of rich archeological sites, numerous museums varying from archeology and folk art to contemporary art and music, and, most importantly, a vibrant cultural life in the fields of performing arts, music, and visual arts (Sarantakou & Xenitellis, 2019; Sarantakou et al., 2018; Vitouladiti et al., 2018).

Surrounded by the sea, the city of Athens is a popular tourist destination for domestic and international visitors, both as a city of destination, as well as the major gateway towards the Greek mainland and islands. Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant improvement in Athens' hotel and accommodation infrastructure, with many newly built hotels sprouting up around the city center and the coastal suburbs. The Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 provided a significant boost to the city's hotel industry, and almost all hotels and other types of accommodation now provide a wide range of amenities to satisfy even the most discerning clientele.

The Administrative Region of Attica in 2019 counted 675 hotels of 33,127 rooms and 62,899 beds (*Evolution and Features of the Greek Hotel Sector 2015–2019*). The majority of Athenian hotels are located in the city center: near the Acropolis, in Plaka, in the area around Omonia square, in Kolonaki at the Lycabettus hill slopes, around the Parliament square, as well as along Syngrou Avenue (Koutoulas et al., 2009; Lamnatos & Mitoula, 2020; Skoultsos & Tsartas, 2010).

Albeit the ongoing European crisis, the data for the Athenian hotel industry point to a dynamic—but constant—growth in the tourism sector, which is partly attributed to elevating the hotel establishments appeal and enhancing the overall experience for guests (Tsartas et al., 2017a, 2017b; Vardopoulos et al., 2020). That being said, the city of Athens was chosen for the case study, not only because it is a tourist destination of national and international importance, not only because current data reveal that currently is a tourist destination with significant tourist flows, but also because it is a European metropolis with sufficient prospects of development, sharing common characteristics and combining certain criteria to a number of other cities in Greece and Europe securing extrapolation of the results.

During the research reference period (2015–2019), hotel design in Athens was affected by several external and internal factors that generally influenced the capital city tourism development. The most important of these factors are analyzed as follows:

Quantitative and qualitative changes in tourist demand

After a period of social unrest and economic crisis between 2008–2013 (Chatzidakis, 2016; Karytsas et al., 2019.b), Athens shows a constant regeneration as a tourist destination which culminates during the reference period (2015–2019) (Tsartas et al., 2017; Vardopoulos & Theodoropoulou, 2018). Several quality changes in Athens tourism also took place (Karytsas et al., 2019a; Skoumpi et al., 2021). Specifically, in the International Airport of Athens, international arrivals have increased from 2.5 million in 2012 to 4.2 million in 2015 and 8.8 million in 2019 (15th Visitor Satisfaction & Hotel Performance Survey, 2019). An increase in Tourism is linked to the opening of the capital towards new markets. Athens is no longer only a stopover destination, but also a city break, a meeting place, an incentive, a congress and event destination, and a youth tourism destination (14h Visitor Satisfaction & Hotel Performance Survey, 2018; Sarantakou & Xenitellis, 2019; Skoultsos & Tsartas, 2009, 2010). Travelers visited Athens in 2018 mainly for leisure, since only 13% visited the city for professional reasons. 49% of leisure tourists were families arriving mainly from the USA, Germany, the UK, France, and Italy, and 45% were people between 35–50 years old (*Evolution and Features of the Greek Hotel Sector 2015– 2019*, 2020).

Increase of competition

Tourism recovery of Athens was followed by a boost in construction, which initially focused on upgrading the existing hotel infrastructures (renovating, upgrading, and expanding existing facilities) and then on building new hotel units (*Evolution and Features of the Greek Hotel Sector 2015–2019*, 2020). In order to address increasing competition, hoteliers invest in upgrading their hotel's category or they join hotel chains. According to the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, during the four years between 2015 and 2019, 4★ and 5★ hotels in Attica showed an increase ranging from 19 to 25%, while a significant increase of approximately 48% was noted in 5★ hotels (*Evolution and Features of the Greek Hotel Sector 2015–2019*, 2020).

Changes of the legal framework on hotels

During the reference period, there were some significant changes on the legal framework concerning the establishment of tourist accommodation (*Hellenic Government Gazette Issue A No 155/30–07-2014*; *Issue A No 201/16–09-2011*; *Issue A No 230/07–12-2016*; *Issue A No 24/13–02-12*; *Issue A No 249/25–11-2011*, 2011) that had specific objectives: to create a business-friendly environment and to attract tourism investments (Sarantakou & Tsartas, 2015a, 2015b). The role of the state is reduced, and the engineer now has the responsibility to follow urban planning and

operational standards. Licensing became simpler and quicker. New simplified technical and operational requirements (*Hellenic Government Gazette Issue B No 10/09–01-2015*) give the designer more freedom in hotel interior designing (Sarantakou, 2017a, 2017c). In 2013, building amnesty (*Hellenic Government Gazette Issue A No 174/08–08-2013*) offered the opportunity to tourist accommodation units to increase their capacity (Sarantakou, 2017b, 2017d).

Increase of the sharing economy accommodation

Sharing economy accommodation is estimated to have a share of €1.38 billion to €1.46 billion in the Greek tourism industry (Katsoni, 2017, 2019), while it competes with all types and categories of tourist accommodation. Since 2013, Athens has shown a significant development in sharing economy accommodation. Only via the Airbnb platform, the number of residences officially rented in Athens has risen from 500 in 2013 to 12.000 in 2018. Tourists that choose the market of accommodation sharing belong, mainly, to the group of the millennial city break travelers. 71% of Airbnb users visiting Athens for the first time choose Airbnb due to low cost, but also because they seek authentic experiences (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019; Varsanis et al., 2019). Properties that use Airbnb extend in 25 neighborhoods of Athens, out of which 69% are outside the traditional touristic areas. This results in new touristic areas emerging in the city, such as Koukaki and Exarchia (Balampanidis et al., 2021; Sarantakou & Xenitellis, 2019).

3   Methodology

Following the literature review, for the scope of the current research, a complex qualitative approach was carried out by conducting two rounds of interviews in three groups of key informants and stakeholders, and subsequent successive content analysis, in an attempt to explore current mindsets and practices in the hotel design field. As a first step, a group of experts on the tourism market and tourism planning (Group A) was asked to reflect their personal experiences, perceptions, and beliefs, using a set of open-ended and behavior-based interview questions in relevant areas for the study undertaken. Group A included representatives of the tourist institutions involved with tourist accommodation issues and procedures; the Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Tourism (https://mintour.gov.gr/en/archiki-english/), the Greek National Tourism Organization (http://gnto.gov.gr/), and the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (https://www.grhotels.gr/). The sampling process for Group A did not aim to achieve a representative sample, but was used as a strategy in order to provide more accurate and acceptable results (Vardopoulos & Theodoropoulou, 2018). This was made possible using the purposive sampling technique (Vardopoulos, 2017, 2018, 2019; Vardopoulos, Konstantopoulos, et al., 2021; Vardopoulos, Tsilika, et al., 2021) with the concept of saturation as a guiding principle (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994) in the sampling of the group of experts, who were considered

experts (typically individuals with a doctoral degree or at least five years of experience) due to their experience and expertise in the subject being studied. The experts gave vital insight and guidance to this study; however, it should be noted that they may have completely different perspectives on the topic being discussed; they were not asked to endorse the study's methods or findings individually or collectively.

Through analyzing data coming from the first step interviews, the research topic was narrowed down, providing a better defined conceptual framework, while setting the stage for the second step of the research design. The second step involved asking in person a set of more specific semi-structured questions to two particular parties of key informants; hoteliers (Group B) and architects/ designers (Group C). Group B individuals were selected by stratified purposeful sampling method, including three stratums; businessmen representing tourist accommodation developments in Athens classified into 1. Comfort (3★), 2. First Class (4★), and 3. Luxury (5★) rank (of the European Hotel stars Union Classification System). The three lists were pulled up by the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (https://www.grhotels.gr/), counting only the newly established or recently renovated (last five years) developments. In total, 90 hotels were identified. Of these, a total of 33 affirmative responses for participation in the study were received (representing a response rate of 37% per cent). Among the respondents, 12 establishments were 5★ hotels, 12 were 4★, and 9 were 3★ (Table 1).

Group C sampling involved developing a list of architects/designers working on tourist accommodation establishments (in every way applicable) from hotel industry-related exhibition catalogs. Consistent with the assumptions and objectives set for the present study, haphazard sampling (Etikan, 2016) was used aiming at achieving depth of understanding, on the condition that each participant will provide unique and rich information of value to the study. 40 architectural/ design studios were listed and later approached, of which 7 positively responded to the call for participation in the study.

Despite the limitations arising from each sampling technique used, it must be borne in mind that filling the questionnaire was quite demanding, in terms of concepts

Table 1 Hotels sample analysis

3★,4★, and 5★ Hotels in the city center and southern suburbs of Athens, newly established or recently (last 5 years) renovate * Hotel Chamber Greece	90	
Tourist accommodation establishment participated	**33**	–
Athens city center	22	–
	–	9 (5★)
	–	4 (4★)
	–	9 (3★)
South suburbs of Athens	11	–
	–	3 (5★)
	–	8 (4★)

Table 2 Group C sampling in numbers

Groups	Number of interviews
Group A; experts	7
Group B; hoteliers	33
Group C; architects and designers	7

and certain nuances, and a considerably time-consuming process, which few were willing to face. Thus, experts' knowledge and understanding are considered adequate for this study.

Semi-structured interviews were framed within the following essential pillars:

- The respondent profile (including—but not limited to—socioeconomic and cultural characteristics) and the hotel they own/operate or have designed.
- The objectives served by the design.
- Drawbacks faced during the implementation of the design.
- The parties involved in the design.
- Views regarding the current needs of the modern-day tourists.
- New design trends in the tourist accommodation establishments.

The survey was conducted from May to June 2019. A total of 47 interviews were conducted (Table 2).

Data collected were then subject to content and descriptive analysis towards summarizing data points in a constructive way: (a) presented in textual, tabular, and graphical forms to make it easier to understand and more interesting to read; (b) through the emerging patterns, generalizations are drawn, and theory is generated.

4 Results

The answers concerned a total of 33 accommodation units at the City Center and the Northern and Southern suburbs of Athens. Among them, 12 units were classified as 5★ hotels, 12 were 4★, and 9 were 3★ (Fig. 1).

Regarding the type of each business, the majority were family businesses, while some were private or public (limited) companies.

Respondents were mostly males (91%), working as hotel managers (75.76%), or engineers (18.18%), while approximately one-third were business owners, acting as hotel managers (Figs. 2 and 3) (Marco & Katsoni, 2021).

The majority were university graduates in tourism-related disciples or had tourism-related qualifications through special training. As far as hotel guests were concerned, tourists mainly travel for pleasure (60%), while fewer visit the city for business reasons (40%). Those who mostly visit the destination are families or couples, followed by individuals, travelers with friends, or those traveling among colleagues.
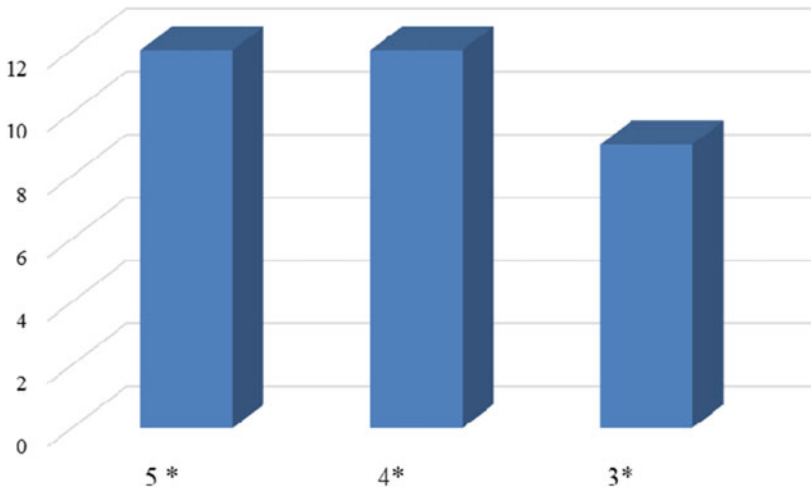
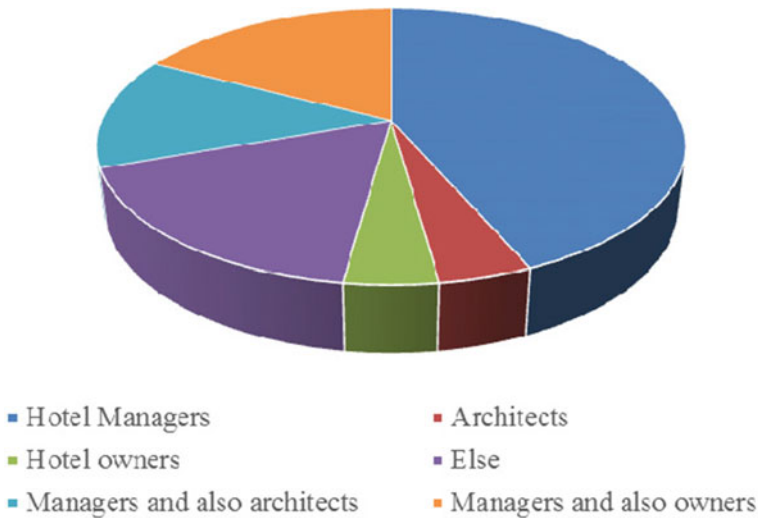**Fig. 1** Tourist accommodation establishments in Athens

Fig. 2 Respondents' professional profile (Center and Northern Athens)

The average stay is between 2 and 2.5 days, as it is still considered a *«stop-over»* destination. Visitors make a short stop in Athens for sightseeing, before or after their trip to the islands, or for business purposes. The average stay rises a bit because resort hotels situated in Athens attract families for a longer stay.

Predominantly, the lodging choice depends on the location, the reputation, the image of the hotel online (e.g., Visitor's reviews, etc.), its services, as well as its modern design. Most participants consider that "Athens City center" or "The
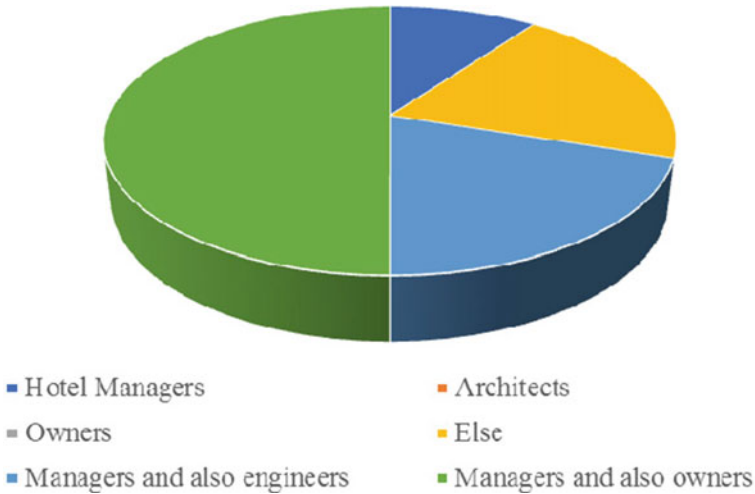
Fig. 3 Respondents' professional profile (Southern Athens)

Seafront" is preferred by tourists; however, in addition to the location of the hotel, emphasis is given by hotel owners and managers on improving the hotel image, the services provided, and the design of their units. Those aspects are considered to provide an advantage between units within the large competition of the Athens hotel sector (Fig. 4).

The objectives served by design, for both existing accommodation units, as well as for newly built ones, were to provide a better quality of services, to increase profits,
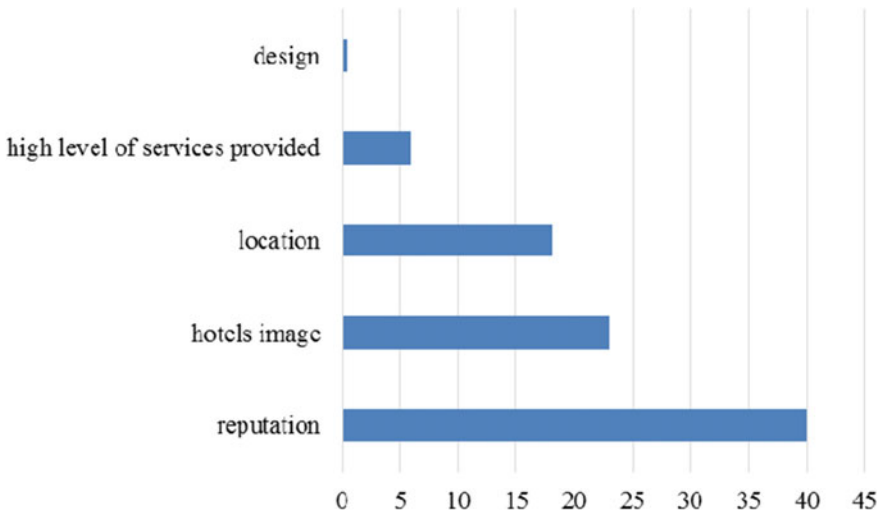

Fig. 4 Reason(s) for choosing accommodation unit in Athens

to promote the opening to new markets, and increase customers' loyalty. All the above were equally taken into consideration. Other important objectives for which hoteliers invested in the upgrade of their units were the alignment with the current institutional framework and the harmonization to modern architectural design trends.

Most respondents believe that to maintain competitiveness, a hotel must constantly search for renewal. Respondents also converge on the fact that every 8–10 years, the interior must be redesigned and that every 1–3 years, a change on equipment should take place.

After the improvements were made, most city centers and northern Athens hotel participants faced a positive outcome in terms of increased reservations. Results indicate increased profits, bookings, and reputation status of the facility, as well as reduced operating costs. Moreover, the quality of services and the work environment have proved to give excellent results.

However, most respondents of Athens beachfront units answered that, after the renovation or upgrade of their unit, they did not witness considerable improvement. Although many "very good" or "excellent" ratings were recorded post changes, regarding the reputation, the services, or the working environment, the impression of many managers in the southern suburbs regarding the results of the interventions was that results are yet to be seen in monetary terms.

Investing in designing and renovating tourist accommodation takes place mainly during tourism growth periods. Therefore, larger unit changes have taken place, at least twice in the last twenty years. The first improvement took place during the period of the Olympic Games of Athens, in the years between 2003 and 2007, which was a favorable financing period, while the second phase of interventions occurred sometime during the last five years.

When tourism grows, the financial reserves that are created allow the owners to finance the interventions with their own resources. Only two cases have requested a financial support through granting programs when needed, additionally to their own resources.

Most hoteliers have experienced delays in completing their work due to bureaucracy in issuing building permits, while, according to many respondents, a lack of know-how on the part of hotel owners was no longer a setback.

Small land-owning prevails in Greece. At the same time, there are many legal binding provisions when it comes to upgrading or changing the category of an old hotel. The initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels on certifying "boutique hotels" has helped a lot in this direction. Many hotels chose to invest in redesigning so as to become boutique hotels.

Answers reveal the need for experts involved in the design of hotels. In most cases, entrepreneurs collaborate with a specialized technical team that includes an architect-engineer, while, during the last decade, the presence of mechanical or electrical engineers appears to become more and more necessary, to ensure technological evolution and the harmonization with the legal framework. In some cases, based on the financial capacity of the company, branding and promoting the renovated unit are assigned to a group of marketing consultants and designing hotel interiors to

an interior designer. On the other hand, new hotels consider the promotion of their modern image as a part of the very concept of their investment.

All respondents recognize that the current trend in the hotel industry of Athens, as in other urban European destinations, is the renovation of old degraded hotels or the design of new boutique units, with personalized services and modern design. Today's visitors are much more informed and require a unique experience during their stay. They also require a high level of services provided; therefore, architects must pay a great attention to interior designing.

Finally, this research highlights a concern of hoteliers regarding the development of short-term rental accommodation through sharing economy platforms (such as Airbnb) in Athens. Short-term rental accommodation has the flexibility to follow all new design trends and not to strictly follow the same technical and functional specifications that hotels are obliged to respect.

5 Conclusions

The research hypothesis was that hotel design depends to a great extent on the perspective of the main parties involved, such as the state, the accommodation industry, and the architects-designers, and on their deep understanding of the external and internal factors affecting the design. To evaluate this hypothesis, a qualitative research was conducted on these three groups of key informants in 3★, 4★, and 5★ hotels in Athens that had recently invested in design.

A first, basic finding of this research is that investing in design is a constantly recurring phenomenon for tourism accommodation developments so as to maintain competitiveness. Also, the tourist market analysis proved that the need for functionality and the need for better legislative provisions constitute the main factors for the design of a hotel unit.

All questioned hoteliers that had recently invested in modern design for their hotel establishments admit meeting the objectives set. However, despite customers' positive reaction and hoteliers' belief that design is one of the reasons modern-day tourist chooses a hotel, it is not yet established in the mind of the latter that it could be considered as one of the principal factors affecting the success of their business. In other words, for most hoteliers, design is not connected to the image or the reputation of their hotel, which they all believe plays the most significant role in the tourist's choice of accommodation. Architects and tourism experts, on the contrary, are already conscious of the significant role design plays in modern tourism and promote this very idea in many ways.

All three groups believe that current trends in hotel design in Athens are: (a) creating small hotel units like boutique hotels, (b) providing tailor-made services, and (c) promoting a unique design or a design that highlights features of the local architecture. These trends, along with the simplification of the legal framework and the growth of competition, motivated many small hotel units' owners—currently the majority in Athens—to invest in design. Short-term rentals are not obliged to follow

technical and operational provisions and are, thus, much more flexible in following these new design trends, while giving customers a *"homy feel"* hosting experience.

The current research also shows that hotel designing is a demanding and complex process. Stakeholders nowadays have realized the need to work with a group of experts, consultants, and engineers. In this framework, the cooperation among hoteliers, architects, engineers, and marketing consultants is established to achieve a design that works for the overall business concept.

Finally, literature has shown that there is a serious gap in studying the internal factors that affect hotel design and, more specifically, the viewpoints of those involved in it. Our study contributes towards this field by arguing that it is necessary to establish a deeper multilateral engagement and cooperation of the broader group of all relevant stakeholders.

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