

HERITAGE HOTELS AS EXPERIENTIAL ENVIRONMENTS: CREATING, CONSUMING, CONTESTING CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

A recent development in Malaysia and Singapore's tourism development (since the 1990s) has been the rise of the 'boutique hotel'. Growing appreciation of architectural heritage, changing demands in tourism as well as evolving aesthetic standards have propelled such hotels into the forefront of the countries' travel and creative design scene. Boutique accommodation in the form of historic shophouse hotels in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, as well as colonial-style bungalows in Cameron Highlands (Malaysia) represent a new genre of hotels characterized by small-scale local ownership, vernacular creativity and an emphasis on unique experiences. This paper explores the emerging boutique hotel phenomenon drawing on two conceptual ideas: the 'experiential economy' discourse in hospitality, retail and management studies, and 'architectural geography' which explores the emotional effects of buildings on people. I argue that 'experience' is central to boutique hotels in two ways: (a) the production or 'creation' of hotels by architects, designers and hotel owners; and (b) the 'consumption' experiences of guests responding to the hotels' creative offerings. Data for this study was collected in 2006-2009 from field work in three cities (Malacca and Penang, in Malaysia; and Singapore) and a highland resort (Cameron Highlands, Malaysia).

KEYWORDS

Hotels; Architecture; Experience; Urban heritage; Malaysia; Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism accommodation has changed dramatically since the post-war period. In the 1950/60s, large international chain-hotels like 'Hilton' and 'Holiday Inn' proclaim standardization as a proud emblem for tourists intent on 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Today, a new genre of hotels strive to be known for their uniqueness. The holidays that tourists go on, the places that they visit and the hotels in which they stay are increasingly a reflection of their individuality and distinctive lifestyle.

The tourism industry has responded to this 'lifestyle turn'. Hotels market their distinctiveness through unique interior décor, architectural styles and personalised services. Many hotels sell 'experiences' that cannot be replicated elsewhere (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). More than just a place to lay one's head, hotels market themselves as providing an experience of being in a unique building or interesting city, culture or community. The emergence of 'boutique hotels' is an example of such a trend, attributed in part to a growing appreciation of local architectural heritage and evolving practices in hospitality, tourism and urban development.

Boutique accommodation exists in multiple forms ranging from designer urban inns (epitomised by New York's Royalton and London's Sanderson) to stylish country cottages and lodges (such as New Zealand's Huka Lodge). This paper adds to this list by exploring historic shophouse inns in Malacca, Penang and Singapore as well as colonial-styled bungalows in Cameron Highlands (Malaysia). Boutique properties are characterized by small-scale enterprises, local ownership, vernacular creativity and unique travel experiences. Such hotels are proclaimed as sites where visitors are able to appreciate indigenous cultures, engage in authentic experiences and interact with local communities – the hallmarks of "creative tourism" (Richards & Wilson, 2008).

Drawing on two bodies of literature – writings on ‘*experiential economy*’ in hospitality/ management studies (eg. Pine, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and research on ‘*architectural geography*’ (eg. Adey 2008a; 2008b) – this paper explores heritage hotels as creative experiential environments. Two lines of enquiry are undertaken. Firstly, I show that historic boutique hotels are creative expressions of architects, owners, managers and designers for whom the *creation* process is a highly embodied experience. Secondly heritage hotels are patronised by both locals and tourists, some of whom constitute members of the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2002), and for whom staying in a historic inn is an expression of their personality and identity. The *consumption* process is, however, also controlled by environmental cues that influence (and even constrain) the heritage experience in highly scripted ways.

The twin themes of this conference – *cultural tourism* and *creative cities* – are intertwined in this study. On the one hand, historic boutique hotels are very much a part of the urban cultural landscape that heritage seekers enjoy. On the other hand, boutique hotels are also at the cutting edge of new concepts in architecture, interior design, hotel management and creative marketing. Such ‘hip hotels’ (Ypma, 2001) not only attract creative personalities as clients (design conscious tourists and professionals in creative sectors) but are themselves purveyors of indigenous creativity, helmed by creative managers, young emerging designers, artists and architects (Page One, 2008). The case study of historic boutique hotels in Malaysia and Singapore amplify the intimate fusion of cultural tourism and vernacular creativity.

CREATIVE EXPERIENCES IN CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

“Experience” is not a new theme in humanistic geography. The identity of places arise because of personal experiences in and encounters with places (Tuan, 1975; 1977), resulting in landscapes having meaning and sentiments for people. This study proposes two ways to conceptualise the links between “experience” (creative impulses) and “hotels” (cultural environments). Firstly, marketing and tourism management studies provide us with insights on the “experiential economy”, and this is useful in conceptualizing tourist spaces as experiential environments. Secondly, discourses in the “geography of architecture” emphasize the effects of buildings on people and activities. It is argued that the architecture of tourism sites/buildings has the creative potential to induce intense experiences (or “affect”) for both guests and hosts, and it is this which boutique hotels deploy to great success in heritage environments.

In the marketing and management literature, the idea of the an ‘experiential economy’ emerged in the late 1990s to describe a heightened state of consumption that goes beyond utilitarian intake of goods and services. Above and beyond “consistent[ly] high level of product and service quality”, demanding consumers look for something extra or value-added which producers try to cater to through novel and memorable experiences (Oh et al. 2007: 119). ‘Experience’ is thus seen as a higher-order means to differentiate and enhance already high quality goods, elevating users to a more sophisticated level of consumption

In elaborating on the elevated levels of experiential consumption, Pine and Gilmore (1999) propose four realms. They include *entertainment* (being entertained in the process of consumption), *education* (learning something new), *escapism*

(entering new realms and acquiring new identities) and *aesthetics* (indulging in a novel environment). The idea of aesthetics, in particular, connects well with our present concern with 'tourism' and 'creativity'. Aesthetic experiences refer to consumers enjoying goods/services because of the environment/physical setting in which the consumption takes place. The creativity and imagination of producers (sometimes called 'experience management consultants'; in this case hoteliers) play a critical role in determining the novelty of the environment and ultimately the success of the experience. This value-added environmental component has also been described as 'ambiance' (after Allen, 2006 cited in Adey 2008b), 'atmospherics' and 'servicescapes' (Bitner, 1992).

Aesthetic environments are highly manipulative in extracting capital returns. Jon Goss (1999) and Jeff Hopkins (1990) have documented how shopping malls are creatively designed to entice visitors to part with their money. Adey (2008a; 2008b) has discussed the affective architecture of airports, while Anderson (2004) has explained how festival marketplaces are sites of commercial and ideological manipulation. Literature on hotels is relatively sparse although some studies provide promising ideas. For example, Wood (2005) has looked at the architectural motifs of American motels in enticing the weary highway driver, and McNeil (2008) had outlined different ways in which hotel research is useful to urban geography. More specifically, Edensor and Kothari (2004) and Peleggi (2005) have explored the romanticization (and fetishization) of colonialism in beach resorts and grand city hotels, suggesting that tourism marketing often provides creative license for the tweaking of historical truths. Collectively what this literature underscores is that 'thematic' environments are self-consciously constructed with specific intents, deploying environmental cues to shape human behaviour and perception. Such cues range from access paths and architectural features, to ambient lighting, music and interior decor, all of which

combine to create what Adey (2008b) refers to as the "calculative architecture" of "affective control".

An emerging phenomenon predicated on calculative architecture is *architourism*. Architourism is defined as the process by which architectural sites – buildings, landmarks and environments – serve as "marketable destinations" that appeal to visitors, investments and media attention (Ockman and Frausto, 2005: 9). Superlative architecture and the promise of an enchanting experience, be it at Dubai's Burj Al-Arab hotel or Bilbao's Guggenheim, exemplify architourism's power. The role of creativity is evident through the way architects and designers develop buildings to grab world attention, and the way marketers and tourism promoters creatively publicise such sites as emblematic of a city/country's identity. This embodied experience of architectural sites has been described as 'architainment' (Herwig and Holzerr, 2006). Boutique hotels by virtue of their pricing and marketing cater to a niche market. The burgeoning of designer inns is seen as one way to capture a creative clientele for whom an artful environment is a marker of their individuality.

As we dwell on the topic of 'creativity', we must note that creativity is not just the province of tourism producers. Increasingly, consumers are also active agents in co-producing their travel experiences and individual identities. Consumption studies have blurred the boundaries between consumption and production, arguing that consumption processes may be creative and productive as well (Lees, 2001: 55). In the context of buildings and landscapes, the architectural significance of a building is not just an assigned value by its creator (planner, architect, designer) but is also actively co-produced or re-produced by its inhabitants on a daily basis (Llewellyn, 2004). What I mean is that users, inhabitants and visitors to a tourist site creatively form meanings which may or may not be aligned with the vision of its creators. To extend this creative

process a step further, we might argue that visiting, inhabiting or consuming a site may also be creative of individual/collective identities. Tourists choose to patronise a restaurant, stay in a hotel, or avoid a destination; and these decisions reflect upon their social status and identity.

Since the late 1980s, geographers have begun to engage with architecture and buildings. The ‘geography of architecture’ is concerned with the experience of buildings from perspective of those who live, work, and move in these spaces (Goss, 1988). While some earlier studies focus on a political-semiotic reading of buildings (eg. symbolic meanings of skyscrapers and monuments), the focus has increasingly shifted to “non-discursive” and “non-representational” approaches towards buildings. In other words, instead of looking at what buildings “represent” or “symbolise”, our attention is drawn to what buildings “do” – ie. how “ordinary people engage with and inhabit the spaces that architects design” (Lees, 2001: 55). A recent foci of attention is the “affect” or “emotions” stirred up through “everyday use” of buildings, as well as the “engineering of affect” by architects and planners to control peoples’ emotions, behaviours and perceptions (Kraftl & Adey, 2008: 214).

The geographic literature provides some examples of quasi-tourism landscapes and their architectural ‘affects’. I have already mentioned some of them, including airports (Adey 2008a; 2008b; Kraftl & Adey, 2008), historic neighbourhoods (Goss, 1988), retail malls (Hopkins, 1990) and motels (Wood, 2005). Without going too deeply into the background literature on ‘affect’ (which also abounds in sociology), one can say that affect is used to conceptualise how spaces and environments move people viscerally – pushing, pulling and lifting them in unexpected ways. Vivid examples of affective architecture include Llewellyn’s (2004) geographic study of London’s Kensal House and the effects of its pastel coloured walls on

residents, and Adey’s (2008b: 446) example of the use of natural materials in airports in order to “de-stress and relax passengers”. In other cases, sensual environments are created through “aromatic architecture” of scented wood beams/floors to evoke welcome and awe (Tuan, 1993), or enriched with the sounds of falling water to induce rest and relaxation in resorts and spas (Ayala, 1991).

A building’s affect is determined not just by formal/ideological design processes, but also by everyday “performances” and “practices” that occur in these spaces. Edensor’s (1998) work on tourist rituals at the Taj Mahal, for example, remind us that people remember a monument not just for their architectural wonder, but also for the on-site ‘wanderings’ they engage in (see also Lasansky, 2004; Lasansky and McLaren, 2004). Architectural distinction and intriguing décor may engender affect, but it is the meaningful uses, personal activities and idiosyncratic reminiscences that mostly determine how people fondly remember environments. Such experiences might include memorable stays in a hotel, friendly banter with locals or fun times at a theme park.

The conference themes of ‘creative city’ and ‘cultural tourism’ are relevant to my study of affective architecture in boutique hotels. In Malaysia and Singapore, boutique hotels are often the outcome of the gentrification of historic buildings. Increasingly, gentrification is linked to urban creativity and the infusion of ‘bourgeois bohemian’ lifestyles in downtown areas (Lees et al., 2008). Florida (2002: 228) asserts that “historic buildings, established neighbourhoods, a unique music scene or specific cultural attributes” differentiate one city from the next, and appeal to cultural tourists. These visitors, along with other creative locals enjoy “urban grit alongside renovated buildings, [and] the commingling of young and old, old-time neighbourhood characters and yuppies, fashion models and ‘bag ladies’” (Florida, 2002, p. 228). A truly creative and culturally rich city

prides itself for its “real buildings, real people, real history”, as opposed to “chain stores, chain restaurants and nightclubs” that pervade mass tourism sites (Florida, 2002, p. 228). The small-scale historic boutique hotels featured in this study aim to provide doses of “reality” and “creativity” to culture-seeking tourists.

METHODOLOGY: MORE THAN HOTEL

This study was inspired by the idea that a boutique hotel is ‘more than just a hotel’ – ie. a place to lay one’s head for the night. Because of their heritage status, historic buildings converted to hotel use are often tied into larger agendas in the city be they multiculturalism, urban rejuvenation, tourism promotion etc. In some cities, boutique hotels represent founts of local creativity, serving as sites of artistic expression as well as markers of urban regeneration (PageOne, 2008). In parallel overtures that argue that “airports can be much more than just a means of getting into aeroplanes” (Adey, 2008b: 447), or that the housing project of Hundetwasser-Haus is “more than a home” (Kraftl, 2009: 117), boutique inns can and do possess far more than accommodative functions.

Boutique hotels are small inns (usually less than 100 rooms) and they are often owner-occupied, specialising in personal service, high staff-guest ratio, distinctive architecture and unique interior décor. Such hotels target a niche market for whom novelty and experience are high on their priority. Boutique inns are seldom part of a chain of other hotels, but if they are, their sister establishments often do not share their name or brand image. Sometimes termed ‘designer hotels’, ‘hip hotels’ or ‘art hotels’, they market themselves as unique environments that transport visitors to different times and worlds.

The data for this paper was collected since 2006 from field work in three cities (Malacca and Penang, both in Malaysia; and Singapore) and a highland resort (Cameron Highlands in Malaysia). In total, 21 hotels were visited and their managers, owners, architects and designers interviewed. In addition to this ‘producer’ perspective, the ‘consumer’ and ‘resident’ perspectives are also important. Patrons and in-houses guests were thus interviewed for their hotel-stay experience, focusing on their motivations to stay in these hotels, activities, and likes and dislikes. A snowball, random sample was derived between 2007 and 2009. Finally, over ten residents in Singapore’s Chinatown (an urban ethnic district conserved for its historic and tourism appeal) were also involved for their reactions to hotel developments in their neighbourhood (end 2006-mid 2008). Each group of interviewees brings different values and perspectives to bear on the boutique hotel phenomenon.

The study of boutique hotels suggests that ‘experiences’ are integral to the creative development and consumption of buildings. To understand hotel creators and consumers, it is critical to consider the role of ‘experience’ in the hotels. For hotel developers (owners, architects, managers), the production process is a highly creative and experiential one, reflective of the developers’ personal values and interests. For consumers (visitors, tourists, neighbourhood residents), how they respond to hotels also reveals diverse experiences that ‘mark’ their status and identity as members of a creative class, city and/or community. The production and consumption aspects of boutique hotels will be explored in the next two sections.

CREATIVE PRODUCTION OF HERITAGE HOTELS

The creation of historic boutique hotels is predicated on providing visitors with a culturally rich experience. Different themes are creatively fashioned according to the heritage of a

site/building, as well as their market potential to attract patrons. What I would like to add to this idea is that the ‘creative experience’ of building a hotel also belongs to owners, managers, architects and designers. In other words, the experiential potential is not just for guests, it is also for/by its ‘producers’ for whom the production process is an embodied, personalised and highly creative experience.

Although Florida’s “creative class” thesis (2002) and Ley’s (2003) notion of “new middle class” do not explicitly refer to hoteliers, the salience of these concepts cannot be understated. If the creative class refers to entrepreneurs working in the fields of arts, design and entertainment, hoteliers are fitting exemplars of this emerging cultural sector. In an overview of hotels in urban studies, McNeil (2008) argues that hotels have increasingly asserted their roles as agents in urban renewal and post-industrial futures. Boutique hotels in particular leverage on “design knowledge” as a form of “cultural capital”; together with cutting edge designers and influential architectural journals, a powerful coalition is formed with considerable influence on consumer behaviours, interior decor trends and other elements that constitute the urban(e) life (McNeil, 2008: 387-8).

The fact that boutique hotels are small and independently run allows operators much latitude to experiment with different stylistic interpretations and management techniques. In many cases, owners are involved in multiple aspects of the hotel including construction, design, outdoor landscaping, even museum curating and art selection. The owners of Penang’s Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion and Bellevue hotel, for example, are also architects who were intimately involved in the design and historical conservation of the buildings. Lawrence Loh, an acclaimed Malaysian architect, bought the Cheong Fatt Tze mansion (Penang) as a personal commitment to restore the historic building to its former glory (Loh-Lim, 2002). In Singapore’s 1929 and New Majestic hotels, the owner’s personal furniture

are to be found throughout the public spaces. Owner Loh Lik Peng’s hobby of furniture collecting began as an overseas undergraduate, and his two hotels today provide a platform to showcase his collection (which has since expanded to Singaporean art works, modernist sculptures and light fixtures). Malacca’s Puri Hotel is owned by a historian, who has installed an in-house ‘History Room’ to commemorate the building’s past and to showcase various Malaccan artefacts.

Interior and exterior hotel spaces serve as laboratories for the creative inscription of the owner’s visions. What constitutes ‘heritage’ is often subjectively interpreted according to the personal interests and values of its creators. Unlike mass tourism hotels, boutique inns are known for their ‘stories’ and offerings of novel ‘experiences’ (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005). These experiences are personalised as the hotels reflect their owner’s tastes and idiosyncratic hobbies. While it is commonplace for hotel marketers to talk about the experiences they offer to guests, boutique hoteliers speak also of their *personal experiences* in the development of *their* hotels. In fact, many of the hoteliers were originally in professions other than hospitality/tourism, and speak of their ‘crossover’ as an experience in itself. Boutique hoteliers I spoke with included practicing architects, former lawyers, a historian, advertiser and a CEO of a pharmaceutical conglomerate.

At Penang’s Bellevue hotel, the owner is also the building’s architect, and an avid gardener with an interest in tropical flora, birds and ecology. The hotel, situated on Penang Hill, serves as an eco-laboratory to experiment with different green ideas including an aviary, the planting of native Malaysian trees and flowers and ‘clean’ water technologies. According to him, the hotel will be the first in the world to offer detergent free water, using the Tamura Water System – a patented Japanese technology that uses recycled water that is “anti-oxidant, micro-clustered and highly ionized”

(http://www.impression.com.my/Penangmain/bellevue/bellevue_hill.htm; assessed 10 November 2008). No soap, shampoo, toothpaste or detergent will be used, in a bid to create a “green hotel... [that is] environmentally friendly and non-pollutive” (personal interview, 27 September 2006). Creativity and personal enjoyment appears to be the hotelier’s guiding principle, rather than the bottom line. As the owner explains, “I wouldn’t want to call [the green philosophy] ‘soft sell’. We have a place small enough to play around and experiment, and test out certain things and enjoy it. We have not even publicised it; we would like it to be a place of discovery” (personal interview, 27 September 2006).

This dual sense of ‘self’ and sense of ‘place’ pervades owner-occupied boutique hotels. The Old Smokehouse (Cameron Highlands; Figure 1), for example, is a ‘mini-England’ fashioned from the combined forces of geography and biography. As a resort built by the colonial government to be a place of respite for homesick British citizens, the highlands has retained its English colonial heritage till today. The Old Smokehouse (built in 1937) was designed as a Tudor country manor, and today continues to charm with its quaint colonial ambience (complete with antique phone booth and English gardens outdoors, and Devonshire tea by a roaring fireplace indoors).

Figure 1.
Tourists posing outside the Old Smokehouse
(Cameron Highlands, Malaysia)



Apart from its historical-geographic circumstances, its owner Peter Lee also designed the Smokehouse to be a reflection of his Anglophile inclinations. The hotel is filled with Lee’s personal collection of blue and white English porcelain, brassware and antique furniture. The hotel suites are filled with wing chairs upholstered in romantic floral chintz, four-poster beds, oak beams and dark wood floors. Each room is also named after personal geographies – places in England Lee had visited or where his children were educated, such as Fair Haven, Glenmore, Algin and Warwick. Lee described these place names as “very personal, very personal English connections” (personal interview, 7 June 2006).

The Smokehouse is creatively conjured as a piece of colonial England in post-colonial Malaysia. While it is easy to criticise this theme as anachronistic, Lee’s intention is to provide “old world nostalgia” for those who “yearn for the past”. He describes his personal vision of an English inn in the following

way, betraying his own creative license in deciding what constitutes “English”:

...the minute they [visitors] come up here, they pretend that they're already in little England. So I want to tell you, no vernacular was allowed to be spoken in the public places by the [hotel] staff. You can speak that in private, but not in the public areas. The whole idea was these people come here for the illusion of being back in England.... Here it's intentionally English.... One of the reasons why I'm so strict about not serving local food here. (Personal interview, 7 June 2006)

When I asked Lee whether he had employed an interior designer, he emphatically states: “I don't consult anybody on this. It's a very personal thing; not because I'm proud, but it's personal.”

The personal and the public sometimes merge in an explicit display of and support for indigenous creativity. This is because boutique hotels are often purveyors of local creative talents in the arts, architecture and design. The book *Art Hotels* (Page One, 2008), for example, documents boutique inns that play important roles in the local arts scene in cities as diverse as Louisville, Berlin and Cape Town. In some cases, hotels serve as installation spaces for young local artists; in other cases indigenous craft workers are commissioned to create works for the hotels. More generally, the restoration of warehouses, brewery plants and the like in small neighbourhoods bring in tourists and young locals, jumpstarting urban restoration and sparking cultural interest.

The case of Singapore and Malaysia parallels the ‘art hotel’ phenomenon described above. In Penang, the restoration of Cheong Fatt Tze mansion and an adjacent row of old shophouses in the mid-1990s was described as the starting point of public interest in urban conservation, which ultimately led to Georgetown's (Penang) designation as a UNESCO

heritage site in 2008 (De Bierre, 2006). In Singapore, the New Majestic hotel's explicit “local art for a local hotel” policy is aimed at providing Singaporean artists and interior designers with a platform to showcase their creativity (Chang & Teo, 2008). The owner of the hotel also commissioned local leaders in fashion design, choreography and theatre to design a room each, with the explicit goal of fusing interior design with allied fields of creativity and the arts.

Boutique hotels espouse “architainment” and “experience” more explicitly than any other buildings. Hotel spaces provide opportunities for guests to experience a local culture, but it is also the producers who experience and are ‘entertained’ in their creative work. Indeed, the notion of “experience” is central to Colin Seah's work as an interior designer. Awarded the President's Design Award 2006 for the New Majestic (Figure 2), he spoke of good design “ideas” as the starting point of any project (URA, 2006: up). Despite Singapore's strict regulations regarding the adaptive reuse of historic shophouses, many novel design concepts have been successfully implemented. New uses of rooftops, the gutting of internal spaces to create height and the inclusion of swimming pools in back alleys are some examples of how architects and designers have worked collaboratively with the state to push the boundaries of adaptive reuse of old buildings (Teo & Chang, 2009). What this reveals is that the URA's (Urban Redevelopment Authority) policies are never carved in stone; instead the creative uses of old buildings by new activities is a continual ‘learning’ and creative process for state planners and hotel designers.

Figure 2.
The historic facade of the New Majestic Hotel (Singapore) belies its modern interiors



Espousing what she calls a “critical new geography of architecture”, Jacobs (2006) argues that it is important to understand the “process geography” of buildings. By this term (adapted from Appadurai), she means that buildings come to be through a complicated process of “action, interaction and motion”, involving architectural, technical and design ideas flowing across space and time (Jacobs, 2006: 7). Creative ideas are never singular but are informed by both global influences and local circumstances interacting seamlessly and constantly with each other in a process. In talking about his design philosophies, Seah speaks of his childhood experiences playing with lego bricks and space ships, as well as his travel encounters as an adult. Even today, personal experiences are essential to the creative process:

One of my first few memories was during an internship at Rem Koolhaas’ practice, Office of Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam. We were designing places, which were about Life, Density, Multilayered Activity. Ironically, we had no life outside

the office. It was work, work, work. At the end, I was so parched and drained. I vowed that if I were to continue being an architect, I would constantly expose myself to Life’s many experiences and live! These days, I love observing the things around me, especially people and how they behave and interact with others and the space around them. (cited in URA, 2006: up)

Similarly when asked for the inspiration behind the 1929 and New Majestic hotels, owner Loh Lik Peng spoke of his personal travels in Europe where he stayed in ‘bed and breakfast’ and designer inns. International magazines like *Wallpaper* and *Architectural Digest* as well as an increasing array of television programmes and coffee table books on hotels also expose guests and clients to global trends in design. It is these “lived experience(s) of the ‘global effect’” that are the essence of process geography, grounding creative design ideas in local decisions, activities and experiences (Jacobs, 2006: 7). For the sensitive architect or designer, creative work and personal experience are often blurred in a process in which the two constantly inform and reinforce each other.

EXPERIENTIAL CONSUMPTION OF HOTELS

We move on to the perspective of end-users – tourists and visitors who stay in or dine at boutique hotels and their experiences. Such experiential consumption may be described as “embodied and creative” (Lees, 2001: 72); motivations to stay in the hotels may be highly *personal* (eg. evoking childhood memories) as well as *creative* (eg. hotel stay as reinforcement or creative of personal status and identity). However these experiences are never entirely ‘free’ because architectural cues guide (affect) consumers to feel/behave in particular ways, as deemed fit by their creators. I will thus explore the affective architecture of hotels while also looking at

how consumers are subject (or resistant) to these architectural manipulations.

Two issues concern us. Firstly, the *creative* dimension of consumption – how a hotel experience is creative of personal status and identity; and secondly, the *affective* dimension of consumption – how hotel architecture and design are aimed at shaping behaviour and experience, and how guests negotiate these creative manipulations.

With respect to identity, many guests consciously choose to stay in boutique hotels as a way to recapture experiences from the past. Nostalgic guests pine for the ‘good old days’ when they used to live in old shophouses, hoping that a hotel stay will manage to re-create such memories. Such forays into the past parallel Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) idea of ‘escapism’ as a key component in the experience economy. Consider what two guests had to say about their choice of Malacca’s Puri hotel and Singapore’s 1929 Figures 3 & 4):

From the website, the hotel (Puri) appeared to have more character, a rich history and individuality as compared with a modern hotel. We also wanted to show it to our children who have little or no chance otherwise to experience buildings of this era (especially since we live in Singapore). My mother, who went with us on that trip, used to live in a house (in Niven Road) that was similarly long and narrow and had an air-well in the middle. I still remember the regular family gatherings at that house during my childhood, when my grandparents were still alive. Staying there gave me a chance to recapture the past. (Gan, 19 June 2008)

I once stayed in a shophouse along Victoria Street where my grandfather worked there as a silversmith. I used to dread going to that place because of the unhygienic condition (it was rat- and cockroach-infested). After it was torn down, I really miss the place a lot especially when I didn’t take any photographs. I guess the only way to experience living in a shophouse is to check into boutique hotels that are converted

from historic shophouse. 1929 is one of such hotels. (Sinclair, 21 June 2008)

Uncannily, both guests expressed a similar desire to “experience” old buildings; both harked back to childhood encounters in shophouses; and both spoke longingly of the past (a “chance to recapture the past”, “really miss the place a lot”).

Figure 3 Figure 4.
Historic shophouses converted into hotels: Malacca’s Puri Hotel (Figure 3, left) and Singapore’s 1929 Hotel (Figure 4, right)



Guests actively call upon their childhood experiences when staying in shophouse hotels. In Sinclair’s case, his shophouse experience parallels a mindset shift from “dreading” to delighting in old buildings. Having not taken photographs of his grandfather’s shophouse, a stay in a boutique hotel serves as a compensation. However, a luxurious Chinatown hotel is worlds apart from a pre-conservation shophouse in Victoria Street, and Sinclair acknowledges that the past can never be entirely captured:

I would say that living in these shophouses definitely doesn’t help me to know more [about the past] because of the extremely good living conditions. They are authentic on the outside but not the inside.... I don’t find any problem staying in an old building converted into a hotel. There is nothing really ‘old’ since massive renovation has been done with the interior. All common hotel facilities have been provided. (Sinclair, 21 June 2008)

During his stay at hotel 1929, Sinclair also wandered through back alleys and the narrow streets of Chinatown to fortify his memories and appreciation of old buildings. Touristic enactments and ‘performances’ – wanderings, photo-taking, interactions with locals etc. (Edensor, 1998) – are often necessary supplements to strengthen one’s heritage experience.

Boutique hotel guests tend to be adventurous and/or trendy travellers for whom the hotels’ distinctive style is a reflection of their present identity. Certainly not for them are the modern, ‘cookie-cutter’ inns. In the same way that boutique inns pride themselves for their ‘difference’, so too the tourists who stay in them. Consider what a French tourist remarked of his preference for boutique over chain hotels:

I love boutique hotels and their themes. I’m a savvy traveler, have a style of my own, so these boutique hotels suit me. Chain hotels don’t suit me, they are not expressive and not in-depth as Chinatown’s boutique hotels.... Their targeted audience are people like me, tempting me to try each different room, to enjoy the coziness. Chain hotels don’t offer me this excitement. (25 September 2008)

A Singaporean guest was even more explicit in her motivation: She said: “I want to see (myself) and be seen (by others) at a place like Scarlet which packages itself with a cosmopolitan appeal” (personal interview, 11 October 2008). The Scarlet, with its rich, romantic and wordly ambience is perceived as an extension of her cosmopolitan personality and character.

In much the same way that consumers pick branded fashion, a hotel’s signature theme appeals to particular clientele. The stronger the ‘theme’, the more specific is its charm. The Scarlet’s high-fashion theme, the Smokehouse’s strong colonial

ambience and the Puri’s shophouse ambience target markets with niche interests. When asked to describe the Scarlet, a hair stylist used the term “fashionable”, and he went on to say – “I’m involved in a trade that relates to fashion and trends. So, Scarlet’s high fashion and trendiness gives inspiration to me to style peoples’ hair better” (personal interview, 20 October 2008). The links between hair styling and hotel design are obviously tenuous, yet both sectors fall broadly within the creative field. Coming close to the idea of architectural affect, the same guest explained: “Different boutique hotels create different themes to attract a niche market with simple manipulations of colour. I believe these themes are used to reflect an ‘attitude’...”. It is such attitudes and manipulations that animate hotels, making them come ‘alive’ for its guests.

This brings us to the related point on affective architecture. Environmental cues in boutique hotels guide experiential consumption in specific ways, such that particular affects and emotions are called up. Such cues range from physical provisions (eg. hotels with museum spaces and walking trails) to textual cues (eg. books and information sheets on select aspects of the hotel), and even evocative ambience such as “texture, feel, lighting” (Adey, 2008b: 441). These affective supplements build on the thematic experiences promised by hoteliers while also ‘cueing’ visitors on appropriate behaviour and perceptions.

As part of their themed experiential offerings, hotels like the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Penang) and Puri (Malacca) have created museum spaces to showcase key artefacts, photographs and information about the buildings. Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion has two museum rooms with archival material relating to the Cheong family as well as antiques, reproduction of Cheong’s last will and traditional clothing. Twice daily guided tours of the hotel are also offered, with the guide emphasising the mansion’s architectural *feng shui* (Chinese geomancy; Figure 5).

General Manager E. Fam explained that the museum and tours are part of the “authentic Penang” experience offered to hotel guests (personal interview, 25 September 2006). Puri’s History Room features an original well to the building and provides information on Malaccan architecture and urban history. The historic theme is carried through the hotel, never allowing guests to forget its strong Malaccan/Malaysian roots. For its Puri spa, the hotel owner spoke of the importance of infusing an “antique” look and offering only Malaysian and ‘Baba’ (Malay-Chinese hybrid) treatments:

It’s a new market, and people like it [spa], but in terms of design, we try to be ‘all antique’. The spiral staircase – so, there is no clash of the new and old. We try to mildly fuse it in. [As for spa treatments], all Malaysian. It is not Balinese or Thai. We try to introduce a Baba culture, which is local. (personal interview, 11 June 2007)

Figure 5.
Visitors to the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion on
twice-daily history tours of the hotel



Other hotels emphasise their heritage through textual and ‘edu-tainment’ means. The Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion provides a conservation protocol in each room, educating guests on how

to ‘enjoy’ old buildings. Written in a didactic manner, the protocol explains the restoration of old buildings and how guests can make their most of their time staying at the mansion. As the hotel manager asserts, when guests complain of inconveniences, he explains that it is part and parcel of staying in an old building! The hotel also has a historical book on sale to visitors featuring the hotel’s illustrious history and restoration work. Never for a moment are guests allowed to forget they are in a world acclaimed architectural monument, which won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation (2000). The Cameron Highlands Resort has also created a walking trail in a forest behind the hotel, with eco-guides on hand to explain the local flora and fauna. Guide books on local customs of the highland communities, plants and trees are also provided to add to the ‘nature experience’.

Infrastructural and textual aids deepen the heritage experience for guests while also reinforcing the hotel theme and appropriate behaviour of its guests. At New Majestic (Singapore), a brochure titled ‘local art for a local hotel’ serves as a curatorial guide to local art works within the hotel premises. The brochure subtly underscores the hotel’s commitment to promoting Singaporean culture while encouraging guests to explore the hotel grounds in search of art. Clearly, this is not a hotel where guests are confined to public spaces of lobby, restaurant and room alone. Museum rooms, walking trails, protocols and guide books affirm the buildings as ‘more than hotels’, and hotel guests as ‘more than the average tourist’.

Hence, it is curious to note that not all hotel guests make use of the experiential offerings provided. While many praise the hotels for their innovation and unique styling, they are not compelled to use their facilities. Many of the younger guests at Malacca’s Puri hotel, for example, give the museum a miss. The history rooms at Penang’s Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion are

also under lock and key, open only during the twice-daily walking tours. When opened, the rooms were musty and dishevelled, and it was clear they were under utilised. When asked whether he had visited Puri's History Room, one guest admitted:

Honestly, I did not read through much of the historical information. I took some photos in the room though, some touristy photos posing with the furnishings. To me, the room showed that the hotel was interested in educating and sharing information with guests but that did not really make me interested enough to find out more about the person behind the house. (19 June 2008)

Another guest said that she preferred reading the information on the website rather than visit the room. For these guests (and others they represent), knowing that such a room exists is good enough for a historic hotel. Touristic enactments such as reading the website or taking the obligatory photo provide evidence of their 'creative consumption' of heritage.

Some guests also question the relevance of hotel themes to the urban experience. Indeed self-proclaimed 'savvy' travellers are seldom unquestioning consumers who 'buy into' the marketing hype of boutique hotels. The Scarlet hotel's 'red/romance' theme offers a case in point (Figure 6). One tourist remarked: "Scarlet hotel's romantic red theme does not coincide with Chinatown's heritage. This (red) theme is a European concept of 'romance' and 'passion'. It is definitely not a Chinese thing; Chinese often associate red as a colour of fortune and luck, rather than passion and romance" (personal interview, 11 October 2008). It should be noted too that red is Singapore's national colour, and it is also the trademark colour of the head-cloth worn by Samsui women, who used to reside in the shophouses before they were converted into the hotel. These subtle cues are not publicised by the hotel and are perhaps best left to the more inquisitive guests to discover.

Figure 6.
The romantic red hues of the Scarlet (Singapore)



What hotel guests do pick up are cues on Chinatown's more sordid past. For example, at least two guests remarked that the Scarlet hotel's red/romance theme evokes memories of Chinatown's red-light district. For one Singaporean guest, the hotel has a "brothel chic" look while for a German visitor, the hotel's "burlesque vibrant colours" evoke a "forgotten pleasures of the past" theme (personal interview, 6 July 2009). These elicit associations are never outwardly publicised by the hotel, but are not too far off from its intended marketing goal actually. After all, the hotel's main restaurant is called 'Desire', and its dishes are suggestively categorised into 'foreplay' (appetizers), 'main affair' (entrees) and 'lust bite' (desserts). Many of the hotel rooms are windowless and dimly-lit, with suites named 'Passion', 'Swank' and 'Splendour'. The hotel even has an in-house CD track called 'Sensually Yours' featuring romantic songs. Clearly therefore, while 'red' might not be associated with 'prosperity' in the traditional Chinese sense, its evocation of romance (even of the sordid kind) is apposite to Chinatown's history and identity. Architecturally, aesthetically and linguistically, therefore, the hotel is a coherent orchestration of a single experiential theme. Hotel guests

experience this theme viscerally and for the more inquisitive, are provoked to think through the entire association linking romance, with Chinatown's history and elicit identity.

CONCLUSION: HOTELS AS CREATIVE CULTURAL SPACES

Creative cities have emerged around the world, as recognition of the role of the arts, culture and creative sector in urban economic development. From self-anointed hubs like 'Creative City Yokohama' and 'Renaissance City Singapore' to globally acclaimed cities under the annual European Capital of Culture scheme, cultural development makes cities 'livable, visitable and investable'. The notion of 'cities as creative spaces for cultural tourism' often focuses on the creative arts as tourist attractions. Creativity also manifests itself in other arenas including the creative marketing of urban heritage and the rise of the creative class (comprising locals and tourists) attracted to tourist cities.

This paper adds a new research layer by looking at one tourism sector – hotels – and the processes of creative production and consumption. Specifically, it argues that "experience" is a critical component in the boutique hotel development process. Hotel producers (owners, managers, architects, designers) create boutique inns as thematic experiential environments for heritage lovers, and hotel guests seek out such hotels for alternative opportunities to experience local cultures. My research on historic boutique hotels in Malaysia and Singapore reveals that experience is not, however, the purview of consumers alone. As part of the experiential economy, the creation process of a hotel is also an embodied experience for its creators/producers. Personal values and interests are brought to bear in the development of highly individualized hotel spaces. The intimate scale of boutique hotels allows producers to inject

individual touches ranging from innovative ideas in hotel operations to the display of personal décor artifacts. Boutique hotels are thus creative manifestations of their owners and designers' intentions and philosophies, and in many cases also embracing the local arts to offer culturally-vibrant environments in cities. Hotels are therefore the confluence points for ideas and inputs by various creative agents in the fields of hospitality, design, art and even urban planning and ecology.

'Creative experience' also plays a central role for hotel guests. Many choose to stay in historic hotels either as a way to 'create' past memories or reinforce present status. Just as boutique inns claim to be 'more than a hotel', their guests pride themselves as 'more than the average tourist'. In the creative economy, the individuality of a tourist is testified by the choice of a holiday s/he engages in and the hotels they stay at. However, as I have shown, the 'agency' of the traveler is also controlled by the affective architecture of buildings. As part of their thematic offering, boutique hotels are designed to reinforce particular tourist behavior and perception. Hotels encourage their guests to be active heritage seekers by providing museum spaces, art galleries, walking trails as well as information booklets on local culture, architecture, flora and fauna. These infrastructural and textual aids not only deepen the hotel theme but cue visitors and guests on appropriate actions and sentiments while staying at the hotel.

As we speak of 'experience' and 'creativity' in urban tourism, there is one group of people yet to be studied. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore neighbourhood residents, we should bear in mind that urban historic hotels often emerge from a gentrification process that affects local residents (Lees et. al., 2008). In Singapore's Chinatown and Malacca's historic zone, the rise of hotels necessarily marks the loss of indigenous residents whose homes and workplaces are taken over by a 'new middle class' and their business concerns (Ley, 2003). This 'culture of invasion'

is not peculiar to boutique hotels of course, but common in different urban transformation processes including waterfront redevelopment, and the creation of new arts and cultural zones in post-industrializing cities. Nagging questions remain to be answered – how do local communities cope with this invasion and what are their strategies of resistance and creative negotiation? How will the new creative city/sector emerge alongside the “creative have nots” (Peck, 2005), and what socio-economic opportunities are open to this urban population? These are questions pertinent not only to the study of boutique hotels but more generally research on tourism urbanization.

The intersection of cultural tourism and creative cities – ‘creative tourism in cities’ – yields opportunities to enmesh tourism research in the burgeoning field of urban creativity and change. The cross fertilization of research ideas and insights will hopefully inspire new ways to envision tourism as a critical and creative component in urban life and livelihood.

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