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EATING WITH THE GHOSTS OF HORSES: towards an understanding of the genius loci of tearooms in historic houses

Key Words: stables; hospitality; 'genius loci' ; tearooms; historic houses; flaneur.

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a piece of exploratory research looking at how hospitality venues can utilise historic buildings and maintain and use the historic context of the building to enhance the hospitality experience through the genius loci of the setting, the spirit of the place. The authors report on 3 case studies where the authors suggest that the hospitality offer, together with the décor and the way the buildings are utilised, work with the historic building to maintain the genius loci of the setting and at the same time create a more authentic experience for the visitor. These case studies use the example of former stables within an historic house setting.

LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES

As stated above, this is an initial, exploratory piece of research, but in the long-term the authors' objectives are:

- 1) To define and describe the genius loci of historic buildings being used as hospitality venues
- 2) To investigate whether the genius loci of a building enhances the hospitality experience in a tearoom associated with that building
- 3) To consider the nature and importance of the hospitality experience to the visitor experience when visiting historic buildings

INTRODUCTION

Visiting a tearoom is an integral part of a historic house visit. The tearoom is an important source of income, but also a way for heritage providers to enhance the visitor experience. Historic England's website contains a link to their top 21 tearooms. A cursory perusal of historic house guides, e.g. National Trust, reveals the restaurant or tearoom as an important aspect of the visitor offer.

In this research we are deliberately not focussing upon historic houses as visitor attractions in themselves, but rather on the re-use of the peripheral ancillary buildings such as stables, sheds and barns. In part, the re-use of these buildings is a necessity, providing functional space for associated visitor needs such as information centres, shops, toilets and tearooms, which will be the focus of this research. Adaptive re-use also breathes new life into functionally redundant historic agricultural buildings, as well as having economic, environmental and aesthetic benefits. However, as Checker et al (2007) warn, a balance between local identity and economic development needs to be achieved. Also, in line with Nederer (1996, cited in Bamert, Stobele & Buchecker 2016,) these buildings represent part of our agricultural past and therefore form part of our cultural identity.

The question we have set out to answer is: Is it possible to create a hospitality offer via a tearoom that conserves the *genius loci* of these buildings for a visitor to experience? The research is at an exploratory stage. 3 short case studies are provided which, in the authors' view, demonstrate how the tensions in the reuse of these buildings have been overcome in order to provide an appropriate visitor experience.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts the concept of the flaneur, the French term for a stroller or urban observer. Benjamin (2007) cited in Rio (2015) uses the concept of the flaneur as an urban observer and explorer of the modern urban experience. He views the flaneur as an analytical tool: 'the observer-participant'.

The authors propose that, as tearooms are such an important aspect of visiting historic houses, the concept of the flaneur is a valid one for the purpose of this research. It gives the research a different perspective to that of traditional participant observation, which focuses on ethnographic research, on learning the culture or subculture of the people being studied (Punch, 2014). In this instance the role of the flaneur is simply to observe this particular aspect of the historic house visit. As stated by Wilson (1995), the researcher takes visual possession of the building simply by looking and experiencing its *genius loci*.

A key aspect of a historic house is its sense of place. In order to understand that sense of place for the tearoom it is necessary to position it in the historic context of the building, and the overall complex of buildings. The authors propose that the "authenticity" of a particular tearoom experience is dependent on its location and position within the landscape of the historic building. These all add to the character of a tearoom. What the researchers are trying to do is unpick the concept of the *genius loci* of a particular tearoom to see if there are common themes underlying the *genius loci* of different tearooms within the context of historic house.

In this research we are applying the concepts of the *genius loci* as defined by Jiven and Larkham (2010) in their review of sense of place, character and authenticity within the urban context. Their focus is on the intangible "atmosphere of a place", taking into account all the elements that create an environment. In support of the methodology adopted, Jakle (1987) suggested that the best person to experience and describe the *genius loci* of a place is the tourist, the visitor, as tourism 'involves the deliberate searching out of a place experience' (Jakle, 1987, p.8). The concept of *genius loci* is implicitly used by other researchers to perceive and to describe that which is perceived holistically, through the senses (Walter, 1988). Thus the visitor flaneur as defined here is an appropriate, if novel, methodological approach to identifying, describing and evaluating the *genius loci* and, hence, authenticity of a tearoom.

In broad methodological terms, the approach of the flaneur/s, who are the authors in this instance, fits into the approach of sociological impressionism presented by Lynch (2005) as an appropriate methodological approach for undertaking research into the hospitality context. In particular, the value and role of personal experiences

is recognised, by sociological impressionism, and has been for a considerable period eg Ridley & Love (1999). Lynch has published a number of papers under the auspices of "autobiographical sociology" as a way of gaining insights into the 'home' hospitality experience. Lynch (2005) `notes that sociological impressionism has a resonance with a critical theory perspective, but what impressionism provides is an 'island of subjectivity':

'It is preoccupied with the subjective experience, the spiritual, emotional self. It may be a difficult concept to grasp, but is best thought of here as a focus on the intangibles that arise from the hospitality experience, a search for non-cultural objectifications' (Lynch, 2005, p. 530).

We are proposing here is that this is exactly what the genius loci of a café is.

CASE STUDIES

The 3 case studies chosen here epitomise how historic buildings can be utilised as hospitality venues, yet still maintain their spirit of place:

PEOVER HALL: This Elizabethan house is still used today as a family home. Its Carolean stable block is Grade 1 listed, containing Tuscan columns, arches and a fine strapwork plaster ceiling (Tatton Estate, 2018). Worsley (2004, p 41) refers to country house stables being more 'what one would expect of a domestic interior, not a utilitarian space'. However, the tearoom is not sited in the Carolean stables, but in a separate, more "lowly" stable block that was patently built not for show, but as a utilitarian space. The eating area is actually in the stable. It is interesting that they have chosen this site rather than something more grand, but the authors would suggest that this is more in keeping with the homely atmosphere of the lived-in Hall than the grand Carolean stables and therefore remains true to the genius loci.

CALKE ABBEY: A National Trust property, which atypically tells the story of the country house in decline in the 20th century (The National Forest, 2020). The ethos applied to Calke Abbey is effectively summed up by the sign on entry to the site: "Welcome to Calke Abbey, the unstately stately home", and goes hand in hand with the under-manicured appearance of the parkland, peeling paintwork of the stables and ancillary buildings and peeling paint and wallpaper within the main house. It is purposefully under-restored. Originally the site of an Augustinian priory, the site consists of the Grade 1 listed main house, the stables and riding school (Grade 2* listed), barns and ancillary buildings (Grade 2 listed). There are also kitchen gardens, pleasure gardens and parkland (Historic England, 2020).

The main focus of this case study is the ancillary buildings which form the shop and café entrance - a single storey building, formerly a range of outbuildings, which form one side of a courtyard which then run into a double height barn, both of brick construction, with tiled roof where the seating area for the café is located. In contrast, but aesthetically empathetic to their surroundings, the interior of these buildings is stripped back brick, exposed beams, minimal decoration. The double height windows contribute to this light and airy feel and the wooden topped tables and painted country kitchen chairs add to the minimalist but effective look and feel of the place.

In one stable a willow horse and foal stand, patient and contented. These horses seem to be in tune with the spirit of the place, the genius loci, and the fact that they are composed of willow, a sacred tree in Celtic mythology, seems to augment this feeling of sense of place. Seeing these horses acts as a catalyst, transporting people back to the past and the genius loci of the stable.

CHATSWORTH HOUSE: Worsley (2004, p.215) refers to these stables as 'probably the most architecturally ambitious stables ever built'. They comprise a number of buildings ranged around a central quadrangle. In the shop some goods are actually displayed in the stalls, complete with partitions, pillars and hayracks. However, the goods displayed – tartan outdoor clothing, a stuffed toy dog kitted out in its waterproof coat – seem to fit in with the "country gentrified" genius loci. An 'upmarket' afternoon tea is served in the Flying Childers tearoom, on 'Wedgwood tea ware with Wedgwood teas and Chatsworth coffees' (Chatsworth, 2020). Again, this fits in with the stable buildings, which Worsley (2004, p. 141) describes as 'probably the grandest private stables ever built in Britain', and also with the opulence of Chatsworth in general. However, there are elements that jar – the purple plastic chairs in the outside space, and even the metal horse, which is not like those willow horses in Calke, waiting patiently in their stable as they would have been in life. This horse stands alone in the quadrangle, neither tacked up nor harnessed, and is not going anywhere. The authors would suggest, then, that although some of the stable areas work well and tap into the atmosphere and original usages of the place, others appear to be anomalous and therefore are not in tune with the genius loci.

CONCLUSION

From our observations, we concluded that those places which were successful in maintaining the genius loci, along with the visitor experience, had successfully negotiated the space. Future research is aiming to model this process of negotiation.

We would like to take the opportunity to finish this paper with what is, to our minds, the most successful negotiation of space - Fulbeck Manor, where the cosy tearoom epitomises the old tack room it is situated in, with its open fire and chattering diners redolent of the men who would sit and chat whilst polishing the leather harness and horse brasses until they shone. Indeed, Worsley (2004, p. 250) informs us that 'central heating, or a cosy coal fire, made tack rooms pleasant masculine retreats'. Or, you could choose to eat in the adjacent stalls. Whichever your choice, tack room or stable, you truly are eating with the ghosts of horses.

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