

4. Reframing design for hospitality towards a cultural and sustainable approach to tourism

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4.1 Unsustainable tourism

In the era of the Great Acceleration (McNeill and Engelke, 2014), tourism is still considered one of the main tools for territorial development and for regenerating communities, as affirmed by the UN World Tourism Organization: «an ever-increasing number of destinations worldwide have opened up to and invested in tourism, turning tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress through export revenues, the creation of jobs and enterprises, and infrastructure development» (UNWTO, 2014). Tourism experiences can promote the cultural development and the transmission of the cultural heritage of a specific geographical context (Faro Convention, 2005).

The processes of globalization and time-space compression have determined the popularization of international travel and the accompanying global expansion of the tourism industry (Niewiadomski, 2020). The tourist experience has become an integral and constant part of the lives of a significant number of people, and the places and hospitality spaces where tourist experiences take place are multiplying.

Tourism is defined through a complex combination of several services spread across multiple touchpoints, including spaces for hospitality. Tourism experiences involve systems of spaces-products-services in which spatial, and in particular interior design has a strategic role. Indeed, design has moved from product-oriented research to a strategic, systemic and *integrative* focus (Buchanan, 1992), because of its capacity to connect and integrate knowledge from different disciplines into the creative processes that enable the definition of complex systems.

The massification of the tourist experience has made tourism unsustainable, leading to phenomena such as overtourism and, above all, the exploitation of natural and local resources, causing damage to the environment, heritage and local communities.

Established tourism models promoted on a global scale are focused on fixed business models, repeated formats, high profits and short-term feedback. The tourism experience often revolves around a hospitality space: primarily a hotel or hostel, but also a home booked through a hospitality web platform. All the welcoming spaces that make up what is known in the English-speaking world as the hospitality industry are often subject to refurbishment processes (Perkins and Will, 2021) and have a significant impact on the environment (UNWTO, 2018).

Nowadays, as tourism recovers back to pre-pandemic levels, and the effects of climate change are increasingly evident, there is a need to rethink the entire tourism sector to transform unsustainable behaviours, and harmful economic models and processes, aiming to create innovation in experiences and related spaces to preserve the ecosystems in which the world's human citizens are moving ever more rapidly. In fact, the urgent question that arises is: how can design promote a transition in the tourism sector capable of creating meaningful and valuable experiences linked to a system of spaces and services while preserving natural and cultural contexts? A new approach would go beyond mere guest satisfaction to create a deeper and more emotional connection with the natural environment, cultural heritage and local community, leading to the promotion of responsible behaviour.

4.2 Design research for post-pandemic tourism

The pandemic has introduced a period of uncertainty (Murphy-Greene, 2022), a polycrisis situation in the environmental, geopolitical and economic spheres, which is becoming permanent (Ciravegna *et al.*, 2023).

According to Gaziulusoy (2021), there is a need for radical transformations and structural changes in society (Loorbach, 2010) that require a new ecological mindset, a systemic approach (Battistoni *et al.*, 2019) and long-term vision (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016).

Design, by its anticipatory nature, can contribute to transforming tourism, starting with how contexts are interpreted and how spaces are designed. Indeed, «designers and artists are able to formulate, through artifacts and concepts, urgent political questions that cannot rely solely on regular processes to enter public discourse. In regard to the environment and all associated concerns, in particular, state policy is driven towards reform by the priorities that researchers, designers, activists, scientists, architects and citizens set forth» (Antonelli and Tannir, 2018, p. 29). In this sense, design can drive change to achieve the shared prosperity goals (UNWTO, 2023) focussing on: economic growth and job creation; inclusive development; cultural preservation and revitalization, and environmental protection in the post-pandemic era.

Therefore, this paper discusses how a regenerative approach based on strategic design for sustainability can support the transition of hospitality space-product-service systems into sustainable systems. The focus is on the design of hospitality spaces. In addition, how can design support the definition of responsible tourism practices to influence people's behaviours towards adopting responsible attitudes? The focus is on the relationship with the environment, cultural heritage and local communities, reducing the impact of tourism activities. In fact, cultural and creative industries can move the tourism experience into a sustainable dimension by giving special attention to hospitality spaces.

In the first part, the paper presents a research-based approach that offers a conceptual framework for integrating regenerative

design-oriented processes into the development of tourism experiences focussing on the design of spaces for hospitality.

The second part presents two research projects developed using a design practice-based approach. Starting from the reading of different situations, both the case studies are presented in terms of the way they draw innovation trajectories in the design of future spaces for hospitality, able to foster environmental and social sustainability in tourism. The reflections explored and the practice-based projects are part of an ongoing funded research project in the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano.

The paper contributes to the study of sustainable interiors for hospitality. Starting from a new way of understanding hospitality spaces, and improving sustainable design strategies that implement the cultural approaches to design for hospitality, the aim is to promote systemic change in tourism.

4.3 Regenerative approach applied to hospitality spaces

Considering tourism as a complex system (Thackara, 2005), based on a mix of tangible products and spaces and intangible services designed and combined so that they are jointly capable of fulfilling the end-client's needs (Tukker and Tischner, 2006), a design-led approach can be used to connect the needs of new generations of guests with cultural and natural environments. Indeed, «systemic and interconnected problems need systemic and interconnected solutions» (Battistoni *et al.*, 2019).

Design promotes a regenerative approach that «departs from the sustainable development paradigm by positioning tourism activities as interventions that develop the capacities of places, communities and their guests to operate in harmony with interconnected social-ecological systems» (Bellato *et al.*, 2023).

The practice-led regenerative development paradigm (Mang and Reed, 2011; Mang and Haggard, 2016), applied to spaces for hospitality (Hes *et al.*, 2015), has been explored little in relation to hospitality design (Inversini *et al.*, 2024). It is therefore important to apply it to

hospitality spaces, with the aim of introducing high-tech and/or low-tech practices and technologies that reduce the impact of human actions on the environment. Above all, however, a regenerative approach serves to identify processes that can restore biodiversity, repairing the damage caused directly or indirectly by human actions, and promote well-being. An additional aim is to engage local communities and provide accessible and inclusive cultural experiences, based on transmission of the cultural, tangible and intangible heritage for all types of tourist. Design operates through an interdisciplinary approach, applying different tools such as metadesign processes and storytelling, and oriented strategies. This supports the spread of awareness, knowledge sharing and promotion of behaviour change (Del Bò, 2018) for a new *tourist's gaze* (Urry, 1990).

This is a paradigmatic shift that will drive the restoration of conditions in which plant, animal and human species can coexist and co-evolve in nature, establishing unexplored connections (Wakkary, 2021). This means that a sustainable approach to design expands from a technical and product-centric focus towards large-scale system-level changes in which sustainability is understood as a socio-technical challenge (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016). The process-based, multi-scale and systemic approach (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016) may lead to a reconnection between humans, culture and nature, while also aiding in the restoration of ecosystems.

The aim for the future is to enable people to access responsible tourism experiences, transforming tourism activities to restore biodiversity and regenerate communities, achieving the *2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Thanks to its ability to connect different fields and establish new relationships between social trends, lifestyles, scientific developments and technological tools, design can help to materialize «possible and desirable futures, making them tangible through design thinking» (Bertola, 2022).

4.4 Hòstraka

The first research project is the regenerative floating resort Hòstraka, developed by Rosanna Caldarella, Giulia Etori, Davide Grasso and

Elisa Schembri with Elena Elgani, from the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. Hòstraka won the Sustainable Hospitality Challenge in 2023. The development of the nautical issue and applied technologies was studied with the support of Andrea Ratti and Arianna Bionda (Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano) and yacht designer Matteo Costa (*costadesign.it*).

Considering that anthropic pressure on extremely delicate places, such as marine ecosystems, is causing irreparable damage, the project focused on both environmental regeneration and community activation. Specifically, the project tries to define how a hospitality space can regenerate the ecosystem in which it is located. The product-space-service system, based on a nature-inspired concept, is structured in a system of spaces anchored to the seabed represented by the common areas mixed with floating private spaces. Hòstraka's life cycle is designed such that circular design strategies are applied in hospitality spaces (Elgani *et al.*, forthcoming 2024). The floating suites are low-impact boats for the guests, and each suite has a water filtration system to collect microplastics, combined with immersive experiences for divers to encourage responsive behavioural changes. Through the guest journey, guests can play an active role in the sustainable transition to a cleaner world, being involved in collecting microplastics from the water, as well as educational activities in recycling laboratories, which are open to local communities.

The project is initially located in the Gulf of Aqaba, Saudi Arabia, where there are unique coral reefs, but the development of the project demonstrates its scalability and applicability to different aquatic ecosystems. The design approach of this project still seems to be focused on defining a remedial strategy, known as the end-of-pipe approach, which aims to direct design efforts towards reducing the impact of microplastics on the aquatic ecosystems. However, this project seeks to take a systemic approach to the complexity of the tourism experience. Specifically, it aims to create innovative water-based tourism by innovating in both the hospitality space and the guest experience, with the objective of stimulating the resilience of the environmental context and prompting an active response from the local communities.

Regarding environmental impact, the project aims to create:

- an easily removable spatial system with low environmental impact, ensuring minimal impact on the ground (temporari-ness). The design approach prioritizes adaptability over time, allowing for variation in aggregate space based on use and enabling structures to be repositioned;
- the system's life cycle is designed with the aim of minimizing its impact in all phases.

Considering the social impact, the project aims to define a communi-ty-based tourism model (Bozzato, 2021) that can host activities and services to involve the local community and create positive interac-tions between guests and locals. The social impact of this system has been examined in two directions:

1. guest oriented. The guest experience relates to the edu-cational dimension of the experience, promoting a cultural approach to the natural context. This is achieved by combin-ing leisure with learning opportunities;
2. local community oriented. The project aims to involve the local community in promoting their cultural and food heritage and natural aquatic environments. Additionally, workshops will be held to teach the local community specific skills relat-ed to reusing and recycling microplastics, because collabora-tive creative processes can have a positive effect over time.

4.5 MODE's suite

The second research project is defined through two interconnected research actions supported by an international cooperation activity. The first activity *Del enfoque sostenible al proyecto de la hospitalidad (muebles textiles/interiors)*, coordinated by Giovanni Conti and Elena Elgani, took place in Cuba for the Italian Design Day 2023 involving young Cuban professionals in a training activity.

A process of analyzing the socio-cultural context of Havana through the lens of the local design community was initiated, lead-ing to the identification of significant themes of Havana's cultural heritage. These would be developed in significant locations to host

tourist experiences designed to overcome a stereotypical view of the city. This provided the means to share different approaches and methodologies related to design processes and tourism development; to foster the dissemination of sustainable tourism strategies in the Caribbean context, with a peer-to-peer approach between researchers and young professionals; and to stimulate reflection on social innovation within the local design community.

The second activity is developed through a collaboration between ICE, the Italian Embassy in Cuba, and the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. Three young Cuban professionals were invited to participate in a workshop developed in Milan with Teamwork Hospitality (TH), an Italian company specialized in marketing and concept development projects for the hospitality industry. TH is currently realizing a sustainable and LEED-certified hotel called MODE, as a pilot project, the aim being to reduce the environmental impact of the hotel and engage guests to promote responsible behaviours. The developed process can be a benchmark for hospitality operators in Italy, in terms of design, the management of spaces and the provision of services that are guided by sustainability principles.

The regenerated hotel will be built in 2024 via a process of adapting and reusing an existing hotel in Rimini, with the intention of revitalizing an area that has significance for the history of local tourism. The project – which is of modest size but representative of the Italian hotel building scene – involved eleven design studios that are researching sustainability in hospitality design, for nine suites and indoor and outdoor common spaces. This approach differs significantly from the established design process in the hotel industry, but it is inspired by a similar approach developed in 2004 during the construction of the Puerta America hotel in Madrid. This conceptual approach originated from the Grand Hotel Salone exhibition at the Milan Furniture Fair in 2002.

The design workshop, organized with TH and attended by Cuban professionals and students of the Interior Design course at the School of Design, aimed to stimulate a cultural exchange on tourism and to create different scenarios that anticipate new tourist experience models on the Riviera Romagnola, the first Italian destination for mass tourism in the 1960s that has a long-standing history. The aim of the meta-design process is to realize different concepts

for the same suite, focussing on the application of design strategies for sustainability to the interior of an existing hotel building.

The concepts developed from these scenarios cater to various sensitivities. Subsequently, TH decided to conduct further research and the executive design of the *From Rimini to Havana* concept, developed by an Italian-Cuban team of young professionals and students (Elisa Cattaneo, Rolando Antonio Escobar Hidalgo, Benedetta Franci, Elisa Panizza and Erika Spanu).

The research and executive design phases have begun at the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano, a collaboration between Francesco Scullica, Elena Elgani, Cinzia Pagni, Claudia Borgonovo and Federico Salmaso. The executive design of Suite no. 2 of the MODE Hotel allows the first strategies identified in the concept phase to be developed and implemented in order to realize the space.

In particular, the project team has focused on the processes of:

- research and selection of sustainable technologies and materials for the FF&E [furniture, fixtures, (finishes) & equipment design]. In line with the design concept, technologies and materials are selected to ensure durability in performance, confirmed by product certifications, for use in the hotel sector and to achieve LEED certification;
- re-use and refurbishment (Talamo, 2022) of existing furniture, which will furnish the room by innovating on the traditional criteria used to select facilities for hotel interiors.

The aim is to create a prototype of a sustainable room that can show the workings of an innovative design process and propose to guests new responsible approaches to interiors.

4.6 Beyond Tourism

In both research experiences, the metadesign approach is used to prefigure scenarios, considered a tool for shaping possible futures, concepts and projects with the aim of defining new fields where sustainable innovation in tourism can be expressed.

The case studies explore the creative role of design in connecting cultural approaches and technical competences, defining a more

sustainable space-product-service system for hospitality.

In the short to medium term, these spatial prototypes will support responsible approaches to tourism. Both projects affirm how a renewal of tourism experiences can also start from the hospitality spaces.

This means interpreting the permeable and porous edges of spatial design by considering various social, cultural and emotive, but also technical and material, exchanges between the design of spaces, sustainable strategies, and tourism experiences. Therefore, recognizing «interiors as unbounded and undefined – more as actions than as forms – constructed from constellations of relations and interactivities» (Tipene and Preston, 2021).

Additionally, sustainable processes of rethinking spaces and connection with communities can generate audience development, understood as those dynamic, strategic and interactive processes that aim to make arts and culture as accessible as possible to all (*Engage Audiences. EU Research Report*). In this sense, the tourist experience that is materialized through the relationship to a system of spaces-products-services is considered a cultural experience of discovery, encounter, and relationship with the natural and historical cultural heritage. To achieve a truly sustainable transition in environmental, social, economic and, above all, cultural terms, the strategic design approach can make cultural content and specific competences more accessible, more understandable and less remote, considering the bio-regional contexts (Atelier LUMA), the environmental impact of certain behaviours, and the proactive role that individuals can play in the multi-species relationship.

Design becomes a driving force capable of promoting both experimentation and unexplored interactions, through innovative processes that shift the focus from the environment and heritage to be preserved to the environment and heritage to be reactivated and regenerated, involving those who participate in the tourist experience.

This process of inclusion can be achieved through the specific tools of design, such as storytelling, which can work by stimulating the senses and reason, allowing the public to be more easily involved by proposing experiences that can be transformed into a personal or collective memory heritage. In this way, contemporary uncertainty becomes an opportunity, and design provides a route to «dream new

dreams..., designing for how things could be» (Dunne and Raby, 2013), considering not only technical and material solutions, but also new universes of meaning.

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