

research note

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Selling the past: Heritage hotels

Abstract

This research note is concerned with the phenomenon of heritage hotels. It reviews interest in and understanding of the idea by the hospitality industry and indicates how heritage is perceived as a commercial asset of some value which can be incorporated into products and marketing. Nevertheless, there are economic and other costs to consider in attempts at realising its potential and tensions between redeveloping and conserving. Important avenues for future research are identified.

Key words: heritage conservation; heritage hotels; hospitality industry

Introduction

Aspects of the relationship between heritage and the hotel business are the subject of this research note which examines the nature of hotels distinguished by a heritage element and commercial activity in the field. The extent to which certain forms of heritage are recognised to be a commercial asset by hoteliers is considered alongside the challenges of reconciling conservation and redevelopment imperatives. Findings are based on the analysis of data in the public domain collected from assorted sources and constitute a starting point for a more thorough review, suggesting directions for further research.

Heritage hotels

Built structures are a tangible manifestation of heritage and heritage hotel is a label applied to properties where it is a core component, usually when they are located in buildings of a certain age which may have interesting histories (Freund de Klumbis & Munsters, 2005) and sometimes if they are at or close to a renowned site. Historic hotel is employed in a similar manner and the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. Heritage is a common theme of boutique hotels, defined by their small size and distinctive personality, sometimes fused with avant-garde interior design or décor (Henderson, 2011). Several are housed in buildings designed for reasons other than accommodation in cases of adaptive reuse (Bullen & Love, 2010; Jefferson, 2005) which secures their economic future and provides management with a competitive advantage (English Heritage, 2013). The special experience of staying somewhere believed to be full of character and history appeals to many tourists, particularly those seeking a deeper engagement with destination culture (Ratanaphruks, 2012). Such hotels also satisfy a growing demand for novelty and reflect rejection of the standardisation offered by mainstream properties (Euromonitor, 2011). Vernacular architecture may be favoured (Chang & Teo, 2009), instances of which claim to epitomise notions of shabby chic (Henderson, Liew, Ong & Quek, 2013). The heritage hotel appellation embraces grander purpose-built properties, however, whose long history has endowed them with

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legendary stature. Certain famous hotels belong to international chains and attention to the heritage hotel concept on the part of leading companies is outlined in the next section.

Corporate interest in heritage hotels

Intercontinental Hotel Group is the world's largest hotel chain and seven properties from its upscale Intercontinental brand, exemplified by the nineteenth century Amstel Amsterdam and The Willard Washington DC, are categorised as Heritage Hotels. All were constructed as superior hotels and luxury and location are emphasised, together with historical legacy, in advertising (IHG, 2013). Another dominant hospitality company is Accor and its MGallery collection contains 22 hotels 'inspired' by heritage. These are old structures which were either built as hotels or private dwellings and frequently have associations with famous literary and artistic figures (Accor, 2013). Starwood's Luxury Collection brand features 64 hotels with heritage attributes, albeit often more related to the setting than the premises (Starwood Hotels and Resorts, 2013). The company is investing US\$200 million in renovating some of the 'most celebrated hotels in Europe' such as The Gritti Palace in Venice, originally a fifteenth century home (Starwood Hotel and Resorts, 2012). Hilton's luxury brand is the Waldorf Astoria which takes its name from the Art Deco New York hotel, now over 100 years old, and includes the Trianon Palace Versailles in a former residence of Louis XV (Hilton Worldwide, 2013). Marriott's Autograph Collection of about 46 'strikingly independent hotels' covers those deemed historic (Marriott, 2013) and Four Seasons boasts several 'unique and architecturally important' hotels in Europe originating from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries (Four Seasons, 2013). Regional chains too are active; for example, India's Taj Group whose 'iconic properties rooted in history and tradition' encompass former royal palaces (Taj Group, 2013).

Apart from these well-known groups, independent hotels or those belonging to smaller chains may acquire the status of historic icons with an international reputation. A number in Asia have undergone redevelopment after a period of neglect and decline and now combine deluxe services and modern amenities with physical and more intangible reminders of former glory and glamour (Warren, 2007). The approach is apparent in Singapore's Raffles Hotel opened in the late nineteenth century by the Sarkies Brothers (Peleggi, 2005). It is a mark of their significance that countries around the world have associations dedicated to preserving and marketing heritage hotels, amongst them India (Indian Heritage Hotels Association, 2013). The private sector has also proved willing to partner public agencies and the Historic Hotels of America scheme, run by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, promotes 'quality hotels that have faithfully maintained their historic architecture and ambiance'. There are more than 240 of great diversity across the USA, nearly 100 of which are operated by prominent chains (Historic Houses of America, 2013). The National Trust, a UK conservation charity, entered the hotel business after three Historic House Hotels were donated in 2008 to ensure their long-term protection (National Trust, 2013). Another demonstration of public-private collaboration is that between English Heritage, officially responsible for heritage matters in England, and Marriott on the redeveloped St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London. The aforementioned Four Seasons has engaged in several large scale hotel restoration and adaptation projects which have required working closely with conservationists and planners in European cities

Questions of integrity arise, however, and Peleggi (2005) writes about South East Asian colonial period hotels where the architecture has been altered and enhanced. The result is a semblance of authenticity, exploited in marketing narratives which cultivate myths and are infused with nostalgia for a bygone

era. In a contrasting European example, Ultav and Savasir (2012) analyse how the spatial and cultural values of a prominent Turkish hotel were distorted when it was re-launched under the Swissotel brand in 2008. Frictions are inevitable between conserving what remains of the original and redeveloping for the contemporary market with a view to profit maximisation and there are risks that the heritage proffered is inauthentic or fabricated.

Conclusion

The number of hotels which can accurately be defined as historic or heritage appears comparatively small, but analysis of the portfolios of some of the world's major international hotel companies reveals that heritage is deemed to have a commercial value within a hospitality context. It endows hotels with individuality and distinctiveness, capable of affording an exceptional experience to guests. A selection of older hotels also possesses an aura of splendour and exclusivity and a stay confers prestige on visitors who are prepared to pay a premium, thereby justifying the charging of very high room rates. They are also suitable places for fine dining restaurants, stylish bars and upscale retail outlets which act as secondary centres of revenue generation. Proximity to historically noteworthy spaces and connections to renowned individuals from earlier years are other important dimensions. Such heritage aspects are a means of differentiation, a unique selling point and persuasive advertising theme.

Nevertheless, there are economic costs of adaptation and maintenance to consider which can be prohibitive. Customer expectations must be met and facilities have to be on a par with those in modern hotels of a similar standard, posing dilemmas for architects and designers. Businesses may find themselves involved in conservation which could yield social benefits and serve public relations purposes in communicating a sense of corporate responsibility, but there are possible unforeseen and unwanted obligations and repercussions. Actions are likely to be circumscribed by heritage preservation rules and regulations (Cantell, 2005), in addition to the general planning regime, and decisions and outcomes could be exposed to intense public scrutiny. Effectively balancing conservation and development needs is a challenging task and compromises have to be negotiated which will be acceptable to the various stakeholders. Critics regularly complain about a commercial agenda taking precedence and ensuing loss of heritage or disinheritance as changes are made which obscure actual histories.

The subject of heritage and hotels is thus one in which the disciplines of business and history intersect, with implications for heritage conservation in theory and practice. It would seem a rich field of further enquiry, exploring issues about the use of heritage from both theoretical and practical perspectives. More case studies could be completed of particular properties, companies and development projects and data about corporate and official strategies gathered from management interviews. How heritage is represented in marketing also merits attention as does its contribution to guest satisfaction. The results of such research would help inform decision making and perhaps facilitate public-private partnerships in much-needed conservation initiatives. Society at large may gain from the safeguarding of physical structures which are repositories of a destination's heritage and historic memory while the income and employment generated are beneficial to enterprise and economies.

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Submitted: 04/09/2013

Accepted: 12/10/2013