

Arts Festivals' Impact on the Sense of Place of Festival Locations: The Case of Croatia

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of small-scale arts festivals on creating a sense of place among festival visitors through various placemaking practices. Arts festivals are a vital component of a destination's cultural tourism offerings. However, by adapting to the tourism market, they are often subject to uniformity and blandness, much like the places that host them. To avoid this, it is essential to actively consider the role of sense of place in the design and planning of festivals and cultural events.

The qualitative research methodology employed in this study comprises 40 semi-structured interviews with visitors to five arts festivals in smaller rural towns and communities in Croatia (Grožnjan, Motovun, Ogulin, Zagvozd, Ernestinovo). The results of the study show that the interviewees' perception of the festival locations has changed significantly compared with their previous experiences of the same places. All visitors agree that the festival has had a positive influence on their perception of the place where it is organised and that it has become a defining feature of the place's identity, distinguishing it from other similar settlements in the area. Most foreign visitors indicated that they would not have visited the location were it not for the festival, as they would have been unaware of its existence. Meanwhile, local visitors had previously viewed it as merely a brief stopover on the way to other attractions. The practical implications of the research focus on understanding and enhancing the visitor experience to inform better planning and management of arts festivals. The originality of this research lies in its aim to address the literature gap concerning the importance of arts festivals in creating a distinct sense of place of festival locations in the Croatian context.

Keywords: sense of place, placemaking, arts festivals, festival visitors, Croatia

1. Introduction

Today, tourism is considered one of the most important forces shaping space and culture (Hultman & Hall, 2012). The impact is also visible in festivals and cultural events, which are often increasing in number or taking on new forms to meet tourist demand for a diverse cultural offer.

From the visitor's perspective, festivals provide an authentic cultural experience of the destination through contact with the local community and participation in shared activities (Getz, 1989). The festival experience, which is becoming as important (if not more important) as the festival services offered (Nguyen et al., 2019; Culha, 2020), if positive and memorable, forms the basis for recommendations, not only for the festival but for the destination (Zhang et al., 2019; Culha, 2020).

Unfortunately, precisely because of the importance that festivals have for destinations, it is common to manipulate local culture, customs and space to better suit commercial needs (Lau & Li, 2019), to the extent that all that remains are, as Hughes (1999:129) puts it, "visual signifiers and decorative artefacts of earlier ritualistic practice." This leads to what Richards and Wilson (2006) call the "serial reproduction of culture" and MacLeod (2006) calls a "placeless" festival, i.e. the creation of commodified, uniform experiences with no specific attachment to place (Greenwood, 1977; Davis, 2016) and the diminution of the social significance

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of festivals for the local community (Greenwood, 1977), which often translates into merely nominal, commercial participation in festival activities.

An essential component of festival design (and the festival experience) that needs to be focused on to avoid this, is recognising the importance of the role of place, i.e., the sense of place and its associated layers of meaning (McClinchey & Carmichael, 2010; Richards, 2019). This is particularly true for small (and artistic) festivals, which are the subject of this research.

Placemaking is an approach to spatial planning that emphasises the development of a sense of place and the regeneration of public spaces primarily through culture and art, ideally with local features and active participation of the local community (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014; Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017; Lew, 2017; Sofield et al., 2017; Ellery & Ellery, 2019; Vodanović Lukić, 2021; Tkaczynski et al., 2022). Culture and arts play a dual role in this context. On the one hand, they contribute to social cohesion and the general quality of life of the local population, which is an indispensable prerequisite for modern tourism planning (van der Borg et al., 1996; Hampton, 2005). On the other hand, they attract visitors by offering not only entertainment and leisure opportunities, but also by filling the space with innovative energy and personal layers of meaning (Marques & Richards, 2014; Balassiano & Maldonado, 2015; Dupre, 2019; Brownett & Evans, 2020). This corresponds to the changing needs of tourists, who are no longer satisfied with entertainment-based experiences alone, but are seeking those that promote personal and collective wellbeing (Biaett & Richards, 2020).

This research aims to investigate the impact of small arts festivals in rural areas and communities on the creation of a sense of place among festival visitors.

Small-scale festivals, especially those of a cultural and artistic nature, are often closely linked to their location and show a strong dependence on the place where they are held, primarily through their integration into the local culture, tradition and identity, as well as using the local cultural infrastructure (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011). This is also because they usually occupy a central position in the space (e.g. on the main square) (Bitušíková, 2020). The literature mentions numerous positive effects of small-scale and arts festivals at the spatial level: promoting a sense of local and place identity (Wilson et al., 2017; Duignan et al., 2018; Brownett & Evans, 2020); creating a positive image of the city (Morgan, 2007; Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011); physical revitalization (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011; Anil, 2012); increasing the attractiveness of the destination for foreign visitors (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011); supporting slower tourist experiences (Duignan et al., 2018).

The impact of festivals researched in this paper on the sense of place of the festival locations has not yet been mentioned in the literature. However, some authors have addressed other aspects of these festivals that are worth mentioning here. Roščić and Peričić (2017) examined the reception of the *Actors in the Zagvozd* festival among the local population, theatre audiences and critics. Krajinović (2019) researched the impacts of creative tourism on the sustainability of tourist destinations and its potential to boost the local economy while preserving creative skills and talent, using the example of Grožnjan and its festival. *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* in Ernestinovo is mentioned by Špoljar (2023) in a book dedicated to the history of the colony and Petar Smajić, the symbol of naïve sculpture in Ernestinovo. The *Motovun Film Festival* was mentioned in the literature (specialised magazine *Hrvatski filmski ljetopis*) only in connection with the quality of selected films in the repertoire. *The Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* has received somewhat greater attention in the literature. Batinić (2011) has written about the role of fairy tales and legends in the construction of Ogulin's local identity. The importance of legends for tourism development was the topic of the most recent paper on Ogulin by Botić and Kovačić (2024). Kelemen and Škrbić Alempijević (2012) have written extensively about the Ogulin's festival in the context of the politics of memory, culture of remembrance, and place-making through literature and the festival. In another article, Selberg and Škrbić Alempijević (2013) discussed the process of place-making of two literary places, Ogulin and Sel (Norway), which is based on the materialisation of fiction in the space.

Beyond this introduction, the paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 presents the theoretical background of place-based theory and the concept of sense of place. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the research and provides information on selected arts festivals in Croatia. Section 4 presents the research findings together with a discussion. The conclusion contains final remarks on the issues discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concept of sense of place

The experience of place, or "sense of place", is an integral part of the tourist experience, and therefore, of the festival experience (McClinchey & Carmichael, 2010). The concept is based on the distinction between the terms "space" and "place", where space refers to an undefined, objective spatial reality without specific meaning, while place is a space to which we have given meaning and value after becoming familiar with it (Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2004). The human urge to create a place stems from the need for homeliness, i.e., the creation of a space in which we feel a sense of belonging and rootedness (Tuan, 1991), as well as the desire to make sense of the world around us in this way (Cresswell, 2004).

For this very reason, the sense of place is primarily associated with long-term residents of a place, but it can also occur in visitors who only stay in a place for a short time (McClinchey, 2015; Chen et al., 2021). Definitions of sense of place are varied, and the concept itself falls into the category of vague, fuzzy terms, as it can refer to a feeling, attitude, perception or awareness. However, various authors agree that it arises from the lived experience of space, which usually leads to a sense of belonging, identity and authenticity (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2012; Chen et al., 2021). Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) define the sense of place as a holistic concept comprising an affective dimension (place attachment), a cognitive dimension (place identity), and a behavioural dimension (place dependence). The relationships between these dimensions are not always equal in the various disciplines and studies. For example, the terms *place attachment* and *sense of place* are considered synonyms (Williams & Vaske, 2003), or place attachment is viewed as a construct that encompasses both place dependence and place identity (Silva et al., 2018). The concept of sense of place is also explored without examining individual subcategories (Jarratt, 2015; Šakaja, 2018), a trend also evident in this research.

In the context of humanistic geography, the concept of sense of place gained prominence in the 1970s as a critique of prevailing trends in geography and spatial planning that favored objectivist and positivist approaches, as well as quantitative methods of analysis, while neglecting the social, psychological, and cultural aspects of spatiality (Tuan, 1977). This led to what Relph (1976) calls *placelessness*, i.e., spatial uniformity and standardization, as well as a loss of authenticity and uniqueness, and a narrowed view of spatial phenomena. The attempt to strike a balance between objective and subjective approaches was achieved by examining the phenomenology of place, i.e., the concept of sense of place as everything that makes a place special and unique, with people, experiences, and meaning becoming fundamental determinants (Talebian & Uraz, 2018). In this context, the sense of place is based on the inherent and intrinsic qualities of a place that combine to create a unique amalgam, often referred to as *genius loci* (Talebian & Uraz, 2018).

2.2. The post-phenomenology of the place

The contemporary, post-phenomenological geographical understanding of space and sense of place is characterized by a slightly different approach that rejects the idea of a fixed, static and unique essence of a place that needs to be *discovered* and experienced (Cresswell, 2004; Talebian & Uraz, 2018; Lau & Li, 2019). Instead of singularity and uniqueness, the post-phenomenological approach advocates for polyphony, processualism, and heterogeneity (Ihde, 2003; Massey, 2005), i.e., different interpretations and

experiences of the meaning or spirit of a place that emerge from the active roles of both parties—the place and the observer—equally.

Massey (2005; 2006) thus rejected the vertical notion of place based on a singular identity, clear boundaries and deep roots, arguing instead for a relational and horizontal understanding of place that emerges from connections and relationships with the rest of the world. To avoid reductionism, place is also viewed as an assemblage (Dovey, 2010) – a whole composed of different parts and relationships that are in constant flux, where the only acceptable stance is one of positionality in the middle (Platt & Medway, 2020). This acknowledges the layers of meaning that are already present in space as well as the fact that the process of *adding* meaning is never complete and is always in a state of *becoming* rather than *being* (Dovey, 2010: 6).

This idea aligns with non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008), which rejects approaches that represent the world primarily through *texts* and *discourses*, as if they were already complete and finished. Rather than focusing on the text, non-representational theory focuses on the practices through which the production of meaning is constantly taking place, outside of pre-established systems, resulting in fluidity, creativity and vitality, with the event itself becoming a paradigm of openness and a constant state of becoming (Cresswell, 2004).

With this in mind, and to move away from the established binary notions of spatiality (subjective vs. objective; material vs. mental; real vs. imagined; space vs. place), Edward Soja (1996) developed the so-called trialectics of space, a threefold view of spatiality, following the philosophy of Henri Lefebvre (1991). In this model, *Firstspace* corresponds to material and physical reality. At the same time, *Secondspace* refers to the mental representations and experiences of space, which is consistent with the humanistic critique of the positivist approach to space. *Thirdspace* or lived space at the intersection of the *Firstspace* and *Secondspace* is a kind of superstructure – the result of the daily practices of the people who use it. This corresponds to the aforementioned post-phenomenological processualism, which considers plurality and dynamics in the context of space.

Some authors (Maggiore & Buoniconti, 2014; Richards, 2017; Sørensen et al., 2018) believe that interaction with all three spatial dimensions (physical, mental, emotional) is essential in shaping the tourist's experience, i.e. the sense of place, while Trauer and Ryan (2005) argue that interaction with *Thirdspace* is most important in shaping an intense, intimate connection with the space that MacCannell (1973), following E. Goffman (1959) refers to it as the *backstage*. This spatial dimension is particularly interesting for tourists because it addresses the need for a sense of belonging and fosters the building of meaningful connections to space and people (Trauer & Ryan, 2005; Aquilino et al., 2021). As it is a subjective process, the experience of a place cannot be planned, but conditions can be created that lead to its positive development (Maggiore & Buoniconti, 2014). This refers primarily to the provision of opportunities for co-creation, which is particularly important in the context of festivals (Morgan, 2007; Marques & Richards, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). By actively involving tourists/visitors in *Thirdspace*, i.e. by creating opportunities for co-creation, the so-called *ready-made* sense of place (May 1996) or, as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) put it, the transformation of people into performance props can be avoided.

Furthermore, place-making practices —i.e., activities aimed at purposefully (and also spontaneously) designing and planning spaces for the needs of locals and indirectly tourists—are of central importance (Sofield et al., 2017; Razali et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Vodanović Lukić, 2021). In the context of this study, the sense of place is examined, among other things, in accordance with tools that are present in placemaking practices and represent a kind of counterpart to the above-mentioned trialectics of space: tangible tools related to architecture and general spatial design, intangible tools related to mental images created through branding and storytelling techniques, and mixed tools primarily related to various social practices, street life, food and drink, and the organization of festivals and events (Lew, 2017; Vodanović Lukić, 2021).

3. Research methodology

The paper is based on qualitative research of five arts festivals in smaller settlements (Grožnjan, Motovun, Ogulin, Zagvozd, Ernestinovo) in Croatia. A qualitative method was chosen because it allows for the exploration of the depth of meaning necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of festival visitors' experiences (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-resident festival visitors during the 2021 and 2023 festival editions. The interviewees were selected using a random sampling method in the most frequent locations within the festival area, such as performance venues and workshop spaces. Most interviews were conducted shortly after the end of the performance (Grožnjan, Zagvozd) or in between performances if there were more than one per day (Ogulin, Motovun, Ernestinovo).

The interview questions focused on the impact of the festival on the perception and development of the sense of place, including their impression of the place-making tools in the destination linked to the arts. Interviews were transcribed, and codes were developed using an inductive coding approach rather than a predetermined framework to facilitate grounding key insights in the perspective of festival visitors (Saldana, 2016). The first coding cycle resulted in initial codes that described the key ideas, which were then grouped by similarity and frequency in the second coding cycle. Finally, themes, which refer to a group of related codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), were developed and then refined according to their relevance to the research topic.

The interviewees (23 women, 17 men), who were between 18 and 71 years old, were mainly university-educated or students; a slightly smaller number had a high school education, and two had completed elementary school. Most of the interviewees are employed or still studying (Tab. 1). In Ogulin, Grožnjan and Motovun, visitors from Zagreb and Rijeka and foreigners (United Kingdom, Poland, Denmark, Serbia, Germany) predominated among the respondents, while visitors to the *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* in Ernestinovo and the *Actors in Zagvozd* were mainly from the surrounding area.

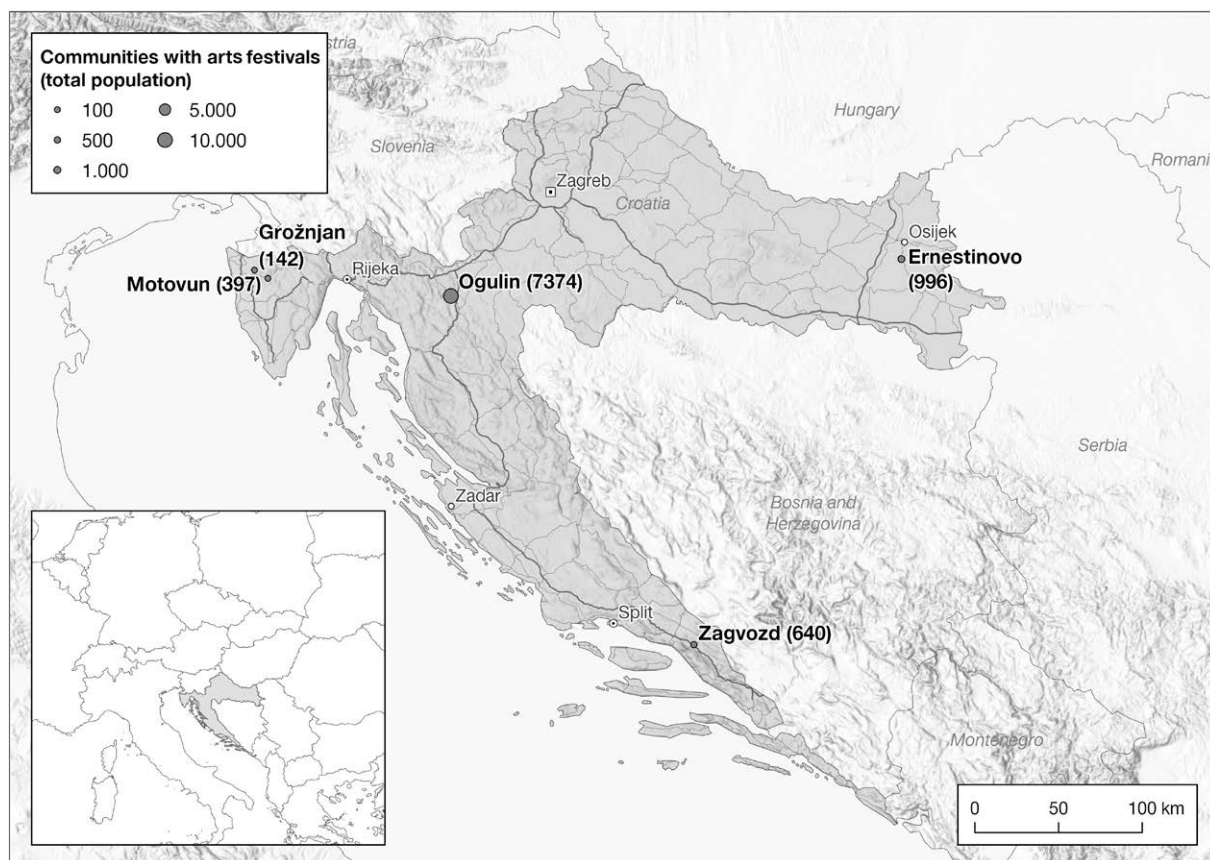
Table 1
Demographic characteristics of interviewees

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	17	42.5
Female	23	57.5
Age group		
18 - 30	15	37.5
31 - 40	7	17.5
41 - 50	13	32.5
51 - 60	1	2.5
61 - 70	3	7.5
71+	1	2.5
Education level		
Elementary school	2	5
High school	22 (11 students)	55
Bachelor's degree	6	15
Master's degree	10	25
Doctorate	0	0
Employment status		
Employed	22	55
Unemployed	2	5
Student	13	32.5
Retired	3	7.5

Source: Author.

A common feature of all the selected events is the fact that they are all art-based (literature, music, theatre, film, sculpture) and take place in picturesque, smaller, rural settlements (except for Ogulin, which is a small town but closely connected to its rural surroundings) (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Map of researched communities with arts festivals in Croatia



Source: Esri; Croatian Bureau of Statistics (cartography by I. Šišak).

The *Motovun Film Festival* was held in the small, medieval town of Motovun from 1999 to 2023, when it was relocated to another venue. It was dedicated to small and independent productions and offered outdoor screenings during the summer months. The *Actors in Zagvozd* is a theatre event founded in 1998, where popular Croatian theatre troupes and actors perform in the open air. The *Jazz is Back! BP Festival*, founded in 1999, is the oldest jazz festival in Croatia and takes place in the small town of Grožnjan. *The Summer Jazz School*, which brings together young musicians from around the world and an international team of mentors, takes place in parallel with the festival. The *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* is a cultural event that has been taking place in Ogulin since 2006. The theatre, music, and storytelling performances are based on the works of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, a famous Croatian children's book author. *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* in Ernestinovo has been taking place since 1973 and is considered the longest-running naïve sculpture colony in Europe. Every year in the summer months, sculptors (and painters) gather in Ernestinovo Park to carve sculptures from local wood, which are kept in the local gallery or exhibited in the park and along the streets of the settlement.

4. Results and discussion

Two key themes emerged from the data analysis, which are discussed separately. The first theme examines the impact of festivals on the sense of place in festival locations from the visitors' perspective, focusing on creating distinct mental images and enhancing their reputation. The second theme highlights the contribution of various place-making tools, including festivals and art, in transforming the sense of place in festival locations.

4.1. The impact of arts festivals on the sense of place of festival locations

The literature demonstrates how festivals are becoming an integral part of the cultural offering and identity in small towns (Bitušiková, 2020), a finding confirmed mainly by this research. The majority of visitors interviewed in all five case studies noted that the festival (as well as the art to which the festival is dedicated) has become synonymous with the place: *I absolutely associate Ogulin with this festival (O9) | I associate it (Ogulin) more with literature than any other town in Croatia (O2) | Actors in Zagvozd equals Zagvozd (Z2) | Motovun has always been synonymous with film, synonymous with a film festival (M5) | I associate it (Grožnjan) with music (G2) | The thought of Ernestinovo is inseparable from the Colony (E3) | There is no Colony without Ernestinovo, there is no Ernestinovo without the Colony (E4)*. Morgan (2007) observed something similar in his study of the Sidmouth Folk Festival in Sidmouth (southwest England). Interviewees referred to the festival as Sidmouth and viewed the town and the festival as two interconnected parts that formed a unified whole.

Respondents agree that the festival has positively influenced the perception of the place and improved its reputation, which aligns with other research on small cultural events (Van Aalst & van Melik, 2011; Sol et al., 2017; Rust, 2019). Visitors often emphasised the change in perception of the place that has occurred thanks to the festival. The prevailing opinion among the visitors interviewed is indeed a kind of disbelief that such an event can take place in such a small and rural town/community, which is confirmed by some statements:

You get the feeling that nothing happens in such places, but they can actually be very interesting (O4).

I would not have thought that something like this could happen here. We often think that this is a more rural environment, where people are, let's say, rough, so we would never think that something like that could happen here (Z7).

It's a small town, but it still has a great atmosphere (G6).

Some visitors emphasized that the charm of the festival lies precisely in the fact that it takes place in a small community, confirming Driscoll's (2014) research on the ability of festivals to create small, intimate public spaces. One visitor in Zagvozd commented on how nice it is to have such a festival in a small community, while another thanked the organizers for bringing such a festival to a small place (Z6):

I think it's great, you don't see something like this in many places. Usually, there is amateur theatre, but here you have professional theatre and high-quality performances, all of which are free for the audience. It's really a unique experience. Moreover, it's very lovely that Mlikota (the organiser) brought the whole thing back to his rural community, showing that not everything takes place in big cities, and that someone here can see a play that is also performed in Zagreb (the capital of Croatia) (Z8).

The festival has become an important differentiator for many visitors, setting the place apart from others nearby because it gives it a certain uniqueness, *a soul that you can feel (M4); it influences the town's vibe (M4); it gives it something special (Z4); it now has a soul and something to show (Z5)*.

Visitors to the *Actors in Zagvozd* festival noticed a clear difference in the perception of the place:

Due to the festival, the place has become more popular and therefore attracts more people. To be honest, I didn't really notice it before. I only knew it was a place in Imotska Krajina, and that was all. I had never been here in Zagvozd before the performances (Z1).

I see it differently, because it's the only one of these small villages here that stands up for something. They have something special. Moreover, it happens every year, and that is a really great thing (Z4).

I didn't use to come here at all, but now it seems to be a small cultural centre that they put a lot of effort into, with good organisation, with Mlikota (the organiser) organising it, and now it seems to be a small place that has a soul and something to show (Z5).

A visitor made a similar comment about the importance of the *Naïve Sculptors' Art Colony* for Ernestinovo, stating that without the *Colony*, Ernestinovo would be *just another sad Slavonian village* (E9).

A visitor to Grožnjan commented on the maintenance and revitalisation of the community, especially in comparison to those in the surrounding area, and attributed this to the *Jazz is back! BP Festival* (and *Summer Jazz School*):

I have been to places like Grožnjan in Istria, and in many cases, the houses are intact, they are abandoned, and I haven't seen that here. It's generally livelier because something is going on (G3).

The importance of the festival for the image and perception of its host location is clearly reflected in the respondents' answers to the question of whether they would visit the place and why, if the festival did not exist. A significant number of respondents, especially those from abroad, indicated that they would not have visited the location if they had not been aware of its existence through the festival. Local visitors showed that, without the festival, the place would serve merely as a brief stopover on the way to a hiking trail nearby, another town or a major tourist attraction in the area, as reflected in their responses:

We are going to Klek (a nearby hill) because we want to come. I doubt we would wander around Ogulin. When we go hiking, we pass through Ogulin, and when there is a festival, we come to Ogulin (O2).

I do not think I would come. It might be just a stopover on the way to my village, where my father is from. Otherwise, I do not think I would come, nor would I have any reason to (Z4).

Well, I would probably stop by if my way were to lead me to Kopački Rit (a nearby nature park). If it were not for these sculptures, I probably would not stop. I would not have a motive for it (E1).

Maybe just passing through, because what is Ernestinovo anyway. It would be like any other Slavonian village (E2).

Those who answered that they would still visit the place admitted that it would only be a short walk and probably a gastronomic experience, as these are places that, as some respondents stated, can be experienced in one afternoon. One interviewee in Motovun emphasized the added value that she thinks the festival gives to the location where it takes place, even outside the festival period:

I would visit it, but it would probably just be a lovely town. I mean, it really is heaven on earth. But the festival gives it uniqueness, a soul that you can feel. I think that this exchange of cultures, energy, opinions, information, and everything else really affects the vibe of the town and the locals, because they are exposed to something unique that others are not. So, I think it gives the city a different dimension outside of the festival as well (M4).

The lasting effect of a different mental image of a place in the perception of visitors because of the festival is demonstrated by a visitor from Zagvozd:

Without the festival, I would never have visited Zagvozd or had such a good opinion of it. I mean, I would not have had a negative opinion either, but because of the festival, Zagvozd remains a cherished memory for me (Z8).

The unique contribution of the festival to the area was highlighted by an interviewee from Grožnjan, who drew a comparison between Grožnjan and other similar nearby settlements.

All the small villages in Istria are very beautiful; they are very quiet, but that is about it. It's not quiet here. If it were quieter, there would be fewer people, which is nice, but it's not the same. The fact that something is happening only makes it better (G3).

One visitor to Motovun (M6) noted that if he had visited the town without the festival, there would have been significantly more time to explore Motovun itself and its surroundings, which is not possible with the packed program of film screenings during the festival. However, another visitor, who would also visit Motovun outside the festival, concluded that such a visit would certainly be overly commercialized and would not offer the opportunity to get to know the town as well as during the festival (M1).

4.2. The role of place-making tools in changing the sense of place of festival locations

As mentioned earlier, the experience of a place results from the tourist's interaction with all three spatial dimensions: physical, mental and emotional (Maggiore & Buoniconti, 2014; Richards, 2017; Sørensen et al., 2018). This research sought to identify which elements related to the festival and the arts (especially those related to the festival program) contribute most to the different sense of place of festival locations (Tab. 2). In analyzing the responses, Lew's (2017) classification of tangible, intangible and mixed tools of place-making was used, which corresponds to the trialectics of space (Soja, 1996), as explained in more detail in the chapter on theoretical background.

The tangible tools of place-making, which correspond to the physical realm and relate primarily to the architecture and design of physical space, green spaces, street furniture, public art, signage and more (Lew, 2017), are the most prominent in the perceptions of visitors to almost all the arts festivals studied (except for *Zagvozd*). In this respect, Ogulin and Ernestinovo stand out the most. Ogulin, which in recent years has tried to position itself in the minds of visitors as a *fairytale town* due to its association with the famous Croatian children's author Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, has perhaps gone the furthest in physically beautifying the place and creating associations with her literary work, which has not gone unnoticed by visitors. In addition to the attractive and newly renovated interpretative centre, *Ivana's Fairytale House* in the town centre, interviewees frequently mentioned elements, such as the medieval architecture in the old town centre and certain natural phenomena nearby (Đula's Abyss, Klek Mountain Peak, Sabljaci Lake). Although seemingly unrelated to literature, these are motifs that are known to have inspired I. Brlić-Mažuranić to write some of her iconic fairy tales, most of which are familiar to visitors, either through knowledge of her works or through the festival's program.

The connection to literature is also reflected in the design of the street furniture, which has been deliberately created in recent years to strengthen the city's associations with the work of I. Brlić-Mažuranić. Visitors highlighted the bronze bust of I. Brlić-Mažuranić in the main town's square, interpretive (plexiglass) panels and pergolas in the park, which are decorated with motifs of fairytale characters, as well as the fairytale-like iron public art and climbing structures (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Example of place-making practices in Ogulin: Fairytale-like iron public art



Source: Author.

As far as public art is concerned, Ernestinovo stood out the most in the visitors' responses. In addition to the art gallery, visitors most frequently mentioned the sculpture park as an element of fine arts, which is the most attractive part of the settlement, with a considerable number of life-sized wooden sculptures. The avenue of sculptures along the main street was also mentioned, as were individual examples of sculptures that have an appropriate connection to the micro-location where they are situated, such as near the building of the volunteer fire department, the local football club, the cemetery, and the church (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Example of place-making practices in Ernestinovo: Naïve-style wooden sculptures in the churchyard



Source: Author.

Although different in spatial context and issues addressed, examples of applying art in public spaces in Ogulin and Ernestinovo, as well as the effects achieved, are like those in the Polish city of Łódź (Mokras-Grabowska, 2014) and the Norwegian town of Vardø (Haraldseid, 2019). Both cities were facing industrial decline, high unemployment rates and depopulation, factors that contributed to their perception as neglected and unattractive. Following the enhancement of the urban landscape through large-scale artistic murals, Łódź became regarded as a hub of creativity and artistic expression, sparking growing interest among tourists. A similar impact was also observed in Vardø, where, in addition to murals, other place-making initiatives, such as festivals, were also implemented.

The artistic impression and exceptional architecture of the hilltop towns were also highlighted by the interviewees in Grožnjan and Motovun, along with a small interpretation centre showcasing the history of the Motovun Film Festival. Visitors in Grožnjan, Motovun, and Ogulin also emphasised the appropriate signage at the festival.

The intangible tools (mental perceptions of the space) perceived by the interviewed visitors primarily refer to the various names used in public spaces, which are motivated by the arts and the festival. Visitors in Ogulin noticed the name of a bar named after a fairytale character (*Stribor*), as well as the name of the elementary school named after the writer I. Brlić-Mažuranić. In Zagvozd, respondents noted the name of the main square, *Actors' Square* (*Trg glumaca* in Croatian), and the name of a bar called *Histrion* (meaning "actor" in Latin) (Figure 4). In Motovun, visitors noticed how existing premises have been transformed into a cinema named after the famous Croatian film director Branko Bauer (*Kino Bauer* in Croatian).

Figure 4
Example of place-making practices in Zagvozd: Name of the main square changed to Actors' Square



Source: Author.

Among the mixed place-making tools related to various social practices, events, aural and olfactory sensations, street life, entertainment, types of retail outlets and more, except for the festivals themselves, visitors mentioned numerous artistic studios in Grožnjan and Motovun, a sculpture colony for children in Ernestinovo and aural sensations in Grožnjan, where music resonates throughout the settlement, emerging from buildings, cafés, restaurants, as well as from the streets during concerts and spontaneous jam sessions.

In other cases, such as the small Australian town of Evandale (Sofield et al., 2017) and the Dutch city of 's-Hertogenbosch (Richards & Duif, 2018), festivals and various public events have also proven to be very important for improving and revitalising the image of the city. With a strong desire to strengthen its identity and attract tourists, the local community's efforts paid off in the form of a festival featuring penny farthing races, which made Evandale more popular and attractive. The same applies to 's-Hertogenbosch, the birthplace of the famous medieval painter H. Bosch, which has gained worldwide recognition and popularity through the creative celebration of the 500th anniversary of his death, consisting mainly of various public events inspired by the artistic legacy of the painter.

Table 2
Place-making tools crucial to changing the sense of place of festival locations according to festival visitors

	Tangible tools	Intangible tools	Mixed tools
Ernestinovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sculpture park • An avenue of sculptures along the main street • Sculptures in specific locations throughout the settlement 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sculpture colony for children
Motovun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation centre • Architecture as an artistic backdrop • Attractive festival signage in public space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cinema hall named after a famous Croatian film director (<i>Kino Bauer</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic studios
Grožnjan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architecture as an artistic backdrop • Attractive festival signage in public space 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic studios • Aural sensations
Ogulin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretative centre <i>Ivana's Fairytale House</i> • Medieval architecture in the old town • Natural phenomena in the vicinity • Interpretative (plexiglass) panels with fairytale motifs • Bronze bust of I. Brlić-Mažuranić • Pergolas decorated with fairytale characters • Fairytale-like iron public art and climbing structures • Attractive festival signage in public space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An elementary school named after the children's author I. Brlić-Mažuranić • Fairytale character bar name (<i>Stribor</i>) 	
Zagvozd		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main square name (<i>Actors' square</i>) • Bar name <i>Histrion</i> (actor in Latin) 	

Source: Author.

5. Conclusion

An essential task of festivals is to convey an authentic cultural experience of the destination. However, as Chen et al. (2021) argue, due to a schizoid approach of tourism towards the space and culture, authenticity is advocated for; however, in practice, there is a tendency towards simplification, which consequently leads to uniformity and standardisation.

To avoid such outcomes, it is essential to integrate the concept of place, particularly the sense of place, as a core consideration in the planning and design of festivals and cultural events. Sense of place develops through develops through place-making practices, the aim of which is to create a place where we feel a sense of belonging and rootedness (Cresswell, 2004). This results from the primary human urge for homeliness and the need to make sense of the world around us (Tuan, 1991). The result of such an approach to spatial thinking is primarily an improved quality of life for the local community and an enriched visitor experience, incorporating elements of personal and collective well-being. This research is based on 40 semi-structured interviews with visitors to five arts festivals in Croatia, mostly located in rural areas. It aims to demonstrate how arts festivals influence the sense of place of festival locations.

The research results showed that the interviewees' perception of festival locations has changed significantly compared to their previous experiences. All visitors agree that the festival has positively shaped their perception of its host location, establishing itself as a key aspect of the place's identity and setting it apart from other similar settlements in the area. Most foreign visitors agreed that, without the festival, they would not

have visited the place at all, as they would be unaware of its existence. Domestic visitors, on the other hand, previously regarded it merely as a brief stop on the way to another destination. The festivals have shaken up the established and fixed identity characteristics of the place, which often carried negative connotations: *a sad Slavonian village; just a place in Imotska Krajina and nothing else; a place where nothing happens; beautiful but quiet*, etc. The arts festivals and their visitors have added a new layer of meaning to the place, *which now has a soul and something to show; it has a great atmosphere; is like a small cultural centre; and is more alive*.

This aligns with the post-phenomenological understanding of spatiality presented in the theoretical framework, as it demonstrates that the thesis of the singularity and rootedness of spatial identity does not hold (Massey, 2005). On the contrary, it confirms the continuous process of meaning production (Thrift, 2008) and the constant status of becoming (Dovey, 2010). The shift in the sense of place was influenced by visitors' interaction with different place-making tools applied in the destination and by the fact that the festivals, thanks to the small scale of host locations, successfully created an intimate public space.

For the formation of a new sense of place, spatial elements related to the festival theme — i.e., the art to which the festival is dedicated — were crucial for visitors. Among the tangible tools of place-making associated with the festivals, the most important were public art (Ernestinovo), street furniture, and the interpretation center dedicated to the writer I. Brlić-Mažuranić (Ogulin), and architecture as a perfect backdrop for the festival events (Motovun and Grožnjan). The intangible tools of place-making that proved significant in changing the perception of place mainly concerned names associated with the festival theme, such as those of cafés (Ogulin, Zagvozd), cinemas (Motovun), schools (Ogulin), and squares (Zagvozd). The mixed tools of place-making mentioned, which include both the festivals themselves and other elements of lived experience (Soja's *Thirdspace*), refer to activities arising from the festival programs (all case studies), art studios and galleries (Motovun, Grožnjan), and particularly notable, aural sensations in Grožnjan that are present throughout the settlement.

Given the nature of the research, this paper reflects a perspective rather than the views of the broader population. It would be interesting to confirm the findings of this study in further research on similar events in Croatia or in other geographical contexts. Further research may also explore the differences in the impact of arts festivals on the sense of place in festival locations, considering both the larger scale of the festival location and the arts festival itself.

The originality of the research lies in its aim to address the literature gap concerning the importance of arts festivals in creating a distinct sense of place in festival locations in the Croatian context. The limitations of this research were related to COVID-19 restrictions, which were reflected in the number of festival visitors and potential interviewees in the first round. This necessitated repeated visits to some locations over several festival days (in the case of Ernestinovo, even for an entire festival edition, in 2021 and 2023). Also, the nature of the research and the willingness of interviewees to answer questions late at night, after the end of the performance (in the case of Grožnjan and Zagvozd) or while caring for young children, as in the case of Ogulin, meant that some interviews were shorter and less detailed than expected.

The results of this research may be helpful for further studies on creating a sense of place in tourism, primarily through festivals and other artistic and cultural events. Additionally, they can offer assistance in understanding and enhancing the visitors' experience, facilitating the planning and management of cultural and artistic festivals, as well as similar events.

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