

Contemporary Challenges in Hotel Design and Architecture: Sustainability, Emotional Experience, and Architectural Preferences in Hotel Selection

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Abstract

Background: Architecture and design, understood as artistic disciplines, go beyond the purely functional requirements of a building program and become key factors in creating attractive and recognisable hotel facilities. In the contemporary tourism context, hotels increasingly serve as symbols of destinations, with architecture and design telling unique stories that contribute to the differentiation and success of hotel projects. **Objectives:** The aim is to explore the role of architecture and design in creating attractive hotels with an emphasis on contemporary challenges, sustainability, emotional aspects and desirable elements of architecture and design in the hotel selection process. **Methods:** Content analysis was conducted using qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with hotel architects and designers. **Results:** The research findings showed that architects emphasise the importance of integrating sustainable solutions, such as ecological materials and energy efficiency, as well as emotional aspects, such as creating spaces that foster a pleasant atmosphere, local identity, and sensory activation. Aesthetics and design, connection to the local context and history, innovative approaches, and functionality and comfort were identified as desirable elements when choosing a hotel. **Conclusion:** The research provides useful guidelines for creating spaces that are visually appealing, emotionally engaging, sustainable, and tailored to guests' needs, while respecting local history and culture.

Keywords: hotel architecture, hotel design, competitiveness, emotional aspect, atmosphere experience, smart hotels, sustainability

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Introduction

Architectural design plays a significant role in the tourism and hotel industry and is a key factor in hotel positioning. Contemporary, modern tourists look for more than the hotel's location and special services and pay more attention to architectural style, a personalised approach, specific design, and the overall atmosphere of the space. The fundamental core of architecture and design is an artistic expression through which hotels can be presented as attractive, competitive accommodation buildings. Over the last century, the field of architecture has focused on the functional and morphological aspects rather than on its relationship to people and its environment of interior space (Imrie, 2003; Choi, 2012; Lyu & Kim, 2017; Lee, 2022). In recent decades, however, there has been much discussion on the phenomenological understanding of architectural space, as it has become more critical to focus on how people experience the space rather than on the current visual-oriented architectural form (Imrie, 2003; Lee, 2015; Li & Zhang, 2017; Lee, 2022). The structure and spaces convey the brand's identity through its appearance, creative expression, and psychological presentation. Art, as the purest expression of creativity, can create a special experience just as much as the hotel's interior decorative elements. Contemporary hotels are more than buildings with rooms and beds; they develop into spaces filled with works of art, paintings, sculptures, and digital art as part of the interior decor. Hotels think outside the box, place art in unexpected ways, and challenge guests to think more deeply about their experience (Floričić, 2022). In the hotel industry, interiors play an important role in attracting customers. Interior decoration or design is the act of arranging a space to be attractive, easy to use, and well-integrated with the existing architecture (Tieng, 2019). While hotel design may seem like a long-term marketing strategy that influences consumer accommodation choices, academic understanding of this aspect remains surprisingly sparse. Previous studies often compare only the perspectives of architects and the general public or focus on consumer satisfaction in large hotels (Sirirat et al., 2024).

By planning, designing, and building the hotel, one strives to achieve complete expediency and aesthetics to satisfy the needs of guests, staff, and owners. Guest needs go beyond basic functional requirements and extend to creating an emotional experience, making emotional design an important segment in hotel interior planning. Although there are already many studies on the phenomenological understanding of architecture, these rarely discuss the importance of the interior experience of architecture and its connection to the emotional aspects (Lee, 2022).

The strength of a good project lies in the architects themselves and their ability to perceive the world with a sense of space, ambience and functionality (Kim et al, 2020). In addition to their perceptive abilities, they must act in synergy with all project members – designers, investors, potential users – to respond to the complex demands of project stakeholders. Integrating the perspectives of hotel design experts, architects, and marketers working together is rarely seen in existing studies (Kim et al., 2019; Anastasiadou et al., 2022; Sirirat et al., 2024).

Many architects and design-oriented firms in architecture strive to find sustainable solutions, applying a holistic approach that considers all aspects of the design process and its environmental impact (Jauhari & Verma, 2014; Mensah, 2019). Incorporating sustainability practices into business activities has become not only an approach but also a necessity, compelling companies to develop competitive strategies (Osorio, 2024). Although there is a wealth of research on the implementation of sustainable practices in architecture, there is a lack of research specific to the hotel industry and how architects integrate sustainability features into hotel design.

The general aim of this paper is to explore the role of architecture and design in creating attractive hotels through the exploration of the views and considerations of a group of experts, architects, and interior designers. In accordance with the defined aim, the following research questions are posed: (i) RQ1: What specific challenges and professional motivations encourage architects to choose hotel design?; (ii) RQ2: What are the key sustainability characteristics that architects integrate into hotel design?, (iii) RQ3: Do the architects of contemporary hotels recognise emotional aspects when designing a hotel, and which emotional key aspects?, and (iv) RQ4: What are the desirable elements of architecture and design, and the integral quality that influences the choice of a hotel from the perspective of architects in the role of tourists?

Given the exploratory nature of the research problem, the study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on in-depth interviews with architects and design experts involved in hotel projects. This approach is appropriate because the research does not aim to measure guest preferences statistically, but to understand how professionals interpret contemporary challenges in hotel architecture and design, including sustainability, emotional experience, local identity, functionality, and aesthetic value. By focusing on expert perspectives, the study provides insight into the reasoning, priorities, and design logic that shape hotel projects before they are experienced by guests. The qualitative design, therefore, enables a better understanding of architectural decision-making and complements existing hospitality research, which has more often examined hotel design from the perspectives of consumers, service quality, or operational performance.

The paper's contributions lie in considering new aspects of architecture and design in the hotel industry to create a competitive advantage. New knowledge could bridge the gap created by the profound need of consumers, hotel guests, for new experiences, sensations, and an immersive lifestyle, and by hotels that go beyond uniform characteristics and accommodation structures that provide lodging and food services.

The first part of the paper presents theoretical assumptions and new approaches to hotel architecture and design. The methodology is specified in the second part of the paper, while the research results are presented in the third part. The discussion, implications, and conclusion sections provide a summary of the research, including the research questions, theoretical implications, managerial implications, limitations, and future recommendations.

Literature review

Architectural design in the hotel industry

Architecture as a set of values for the design of material physical buildings is conceived, designed, realised, and built in response to existing conditions and user requirements. Conditions may often be functional but may also be reflected in varying degrees of social, political and economic climate. The initial stage of any design process is recognising a problematic situation and deciding to find a solution. Design is primarily a voluntary act, a purposeful effort. The designer must first document the problem's existing conditions, define its context, and collect relevant data for assimilation and analysis (Čerović & Čomić, 2011).

Perceived as an artistic discipline, architecture is more than meeting the purely functional requirements of a building program. Basically, the physical manifestations of architecture adapt to human activity. However, the arrangement and ordering of

forms and spaces also determine how architecture might promote endeavours, evoke responses and communicate meaning (Skorup, 2020).

The architectural project is assigned the role of explorer of the unknown and affirmation of the new, a catalyst in the turning points of changing worldviews, social, political and technical requirements, and thus the change of architectural means and procedures contained in the definition of style. In the construction of hotels and catering facilities, architecture is crucial because it shapes their reputation and credibility in the eyes of guests. Many tourists will rather choose a hotel built in a domain of aesthetically acceptable, anthracite architecture, than another that fits into the authentic, unified appearance of the hotel facility.

The aesthetics of the space influenced the emergence of new forms of tourism on the market. As development continues, new experiences imbued with a specific story and recognition become increasingly important. In promoting a tourist destination and creating recognisable symbols, architectural design is a key element. Nowadays, hotels, as accommodation buildings, are increasingly becoming attractions that enchant guests. Hotels thus become a means of achieving diversity, as each hotel has its own story, design and organisational concepts. Also, architecture and interior design play a very important role in determining the success or failure of a hotel project. When creating a new hotel, aspects of lifestyle and trends that influence the tourist market should be considered, and attention should be paid to the harmony of architecture and design.

The evolution of architecture, design and quality in modern hospitality

In developed tourist markets, public awareness of environmental issues is growing, directly affecting hotel architecture and design, and driving numerous trends in the modern hotel industry. By choosing the location where the tourist facility is planned to be built, care is taken to create a unique story that integrates with the natural and cultural environment, with pronounced authenticity and the use of local materials.

Contemporary hotel common areas serve as social hubs and gathering places for interaction. Therefore, it is necessary for hotels as hospitality companies in tourism to adapt to the needs of users and to the development of innovations and products to improve the quality of service. The successful architecture and innovative design of the lobby, rooms, restaurant, and the rest of the hotel are the result of a creative idea, a meticulously designed plan, and the project's final implementation. In addition, it is necessary to attract and foster a positive perception and experience of the interior among guests, whether for a short visit or a realised tourist stay with an overnight stay. The importance of integrating architectural concepts and design with service marketing strategies is emphasised. The task of contemporary architecture and interior design of the hotel is to combine the story, the message of both the interior and the exterior, that is, the external environment, including horticultural design, in harmony with the wishes and needs of the guests. Modern hotel guests in the 21st century are looking for fun, excitement, style, fashion, and technology. However, they also value tranquillity, mindfulness, calmness, and surrender to their own mind and body through the concept of complete well-being. Despite today's guests being increasingly demanding and seeking quick responses, it is important not to overload them with too much information, content, architectural and design elements, or sensory experiences. Independent hotels and those in the branding system need to understand that clients are looking for a clear concept and identity profile of the service to understand better and appreciate the experience they have had during their hotel stay. The effects of elements such as stimulating and outstanding

innovation, products, creative ideas, well-thought-out plans, courage, and execution need to be evaluated and combined with marketing strategies to achieve the satisfaction of hotel guests and users (Braun, 2011).

The contemporary hotel industry must monitor global trends and requirements to transform facilities through renovations and investments. The renovation results in improvements in the hotel's standard, quality, and category, as well as increased guest satisfaction. The goal of the investment is to improve the hotel's quality and image. Improving the hotel's image is achieved through product modifications, interior design changes or additions and reconstruction of entire buildings. In recent years, more hotels have been standing out for their aesthetics, primarily driven by changes and developments in the surrounding area, such as green and recreational spaces and unique architecture and interior design. The functions of such hotels become diverse because with the renovation, the hotels become differently themed, i.e. supplemented with, for example, business concepts, conference rooms, spa facilities, wellness, entertainment and recreational facilities, which is the result of investment in their renovation, in accordance with improved trends on the demand side. The change and variety in hotel architecture contribute to their transformation into desirable accommodation facilities of superior design and high quality.

The perception of quality and luxury in the eyes of tourists is changing as society and values transform, driven by criticism of globalisation. The redefinition is motivated by the valorisation of sustainability, green initiatives and the affirmation of authenticity. The luxury perceived twenty years ago, which was reflected through the splendour and opulence of materials and global brands in the modern hotel industry, is described by new values that mark complete well-being, a return to natural, original values, with the application of authentic style and design by local artists and designers (Jiang et al., 2022). "Glocalism" reflects a sense of space and highlights original values, including nonmaterial, intangible storytelling and experiences that provoke unique experiences and new luxury (Iloranta & Komppula, 2022). Al-Gasawneh and Dalain (2023) explain that tourism quality arises from a process that assumes customer satisfaction with products, services, and experiences at a fair price. This aligns with important quality factors, including safety, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity of the offering, and alignment of tourist activities with the natural and social environment. In their study, Manfreda et al. (2023) offer practical recommendations for luxury accommodation operators on the design, presentation, and management of quality experiences. They cite Awan et al. (2023), who highlight the strong positive influence of functional, natural, and cultural experiences on customer satisfaction. In contrast, sensory and social experiences had no significant effect on customer satisfaction. Furthermore, in considering quality in tourism and hospitality, Avelini Holjevac (2002) emphasises that quality is a complex concept, composed of several elements or criteria. The elements or criteria of quality arise from the essence of the quality of different types of products, services, and activities, depending on their use, usefulness, and importance to the customer-consumer. Purohit et al. (2023) emphasises that quality also describes the material, tangible elements of hotel services, including the exterior and interior, the appearance of employees, promotional materials, etc., as well as intangible elements. The fundamental characteristics of quality in modern hospitality are reflected in values for guests, including reliability in providing services, fulfilling the promise given to the user, and excellence in providing services on the first attempt and in consistency in replicating identical services. Business responsibility implies timely activities and the readiness and availability of employees to provide the requested service. It relies on competence, which includes the levels of knowledge and skills required to provide

services, as well as the expertise of contact staff. Human resources and interpersonal communication with users are key to fostering empathy and responsiveness in addressing potential problems and complaints related to hotel services (Geerts & Masset, 2022). The choice of human resources affects the hotel's credibility through the profiles of staff dedicated to guest well-being and safety. Quality also implies the availability of the service, where modern technology enables innovative service models, from robot butlers to butler's corners.

Interior design within the concept of hotel architecture

In architecture, in an extremely competitive environment, design becomes one of the most powerful tools for hotels to achieve diversity and, at the same time, a driver of innovation. It refers to the creative arrangement and integration of structure and landscape, the achievement of specific, functional and aesthetic goals, i.e. hotel design is essentially the result of socioeconomic changes, technological progress, the economic and political situation and environmental factors. The offer from uniform hotel chains began to lose its importance, and the new offer includes design & boutique hotels with unique decor and personalised service. Design represents applied art, i.e. the artistic shaping of objects for use.

The long-term contribution to increasing the competitiveness of an individual hotel is reflected in the organisation and competitiveness of the tourist destination itself. The synergistic development activities of all the key stakeholders of the destination result in a new quality in which the hotel industry grows from a key infrastructure and accommodation facility into a factor in the destination's attractiveness. Awareness of the advantages of synergistic effects influences all activities involved in developing a modern hotel product—from the development of the hotel program to architectural and design solutions. Various internal and external factors, including the recent COVID-19 pandemic, influence transformations in the offer. Improving service in line with epidemiological standards became significant in the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jugović & Maričić, 2024). It influenced changes in space use (i.e., lobbies, rooms, and kitchens) and architectural design (spatial organisation), aiming to enhance the safety of both guests and hotel staff (Puraprom & Dangkhawkeaw, 2022).

While considering differentiation, hotels explore initiatives that could achieve the strategic goals of competitiveness. The solutions are related to a personalised approach to the guest, a unique gastronomic offer, diverse additional hotel services, sensory attributes, and the hotel's visual identity (Mustapić & Vlahov, 2015). Sensory attributes are most strongly associated with memories, which is especially important because every guest tends to be emotionally attached to the hotel they stay at. Olfactory marketing, i.e. the use of special scents, marks a new trend in hotel marketing positioning. The significant increase in olfactory marketing stems from the fact that smells are most strongly associated with memories, which is especially important because every hotel seeks to bond emotionally with the guest (Floričić, 2022) Historically, for decades, the hotel industry primarily focused on business and functionality, and only recently have accommodation structures begun to be considered a factor in tourist attractiveness (Floričić & Pavia, 2017). Since architects have been working on hospitality projects for decades, there is no "one size fits all" in the hotel industry. Since ancient times, hotels have been associated with travellers, leading to a range of hotel types tailored to different cultures. This has led hotel designers to develop innovations in hotel strategies to support hoteliers operating in a competitive market. Currently, in the hospitality industry, numerous hotels are being

built each year, which affects the development of specific, creative architectural, design, and theming (Oliveira, 2020).

Hotel investments, new buildings, and renovations inspired by local culture and art, and enhanced by creative design, stimulate the local economy, thereby creating socioeconomic benefits for the community (Pisarović et al., 2022). They expand the tourist offer, enabling tourism development in the pre- and post-season and generating new jobs through collaboration among local stakeholders and hoteliers (Serreat et al., 2015). In addition, the creation of such hotels has increased the need for specialised employees with knowledge of both tourism and art. One of the most significant features of the art & culture hotel is its involvement with the local community. Given the importance of corporate social responsibility, which has become a focal point in modern business (Zhou Hua et al., 2024), it is necessary to support initiatives to implement it. In this context, the potential of local artists to achieve commercialisation and recognition through hotel exhibitions is evident. The integration of authentic cultural assets into art, design, or heritage hotels enhances and strengthens the competitive advantage of both the tourist destination and the hotel offer, claim Wang et al. (2017).

The topic of small, luxury heritage hotels is also addressed by Thirumaran et al. (2023) and Xie & Shi (2019), who evaluate them extremely positively from both architectural and sustainability perspectives, noting that such facilities are not intrusive and do not require large areas.

Interior design and special architecture influence the perception of space and ambience through their activities and evoke a unique experience, as Williams (2006) claims. The importance of cooperation is emphasised, so that, for example, the entry of fashion designers into the hotel industry, architecture, and design presents a new branding opportunity. Namely, fashion designers or luxury goods producers become the authors of the interior design and often become part of the hotel's ownership structure. Their style is recognisable and unique, and their fame and popularity contribute to the hotel's competitiveness. The aforementioned lifestyle marketing concept is also evident among other well-known personalities in the world of showbiz and entertainment, including actors, singers, and influencers (Mustapić & Vlahov, 2015).

New approach in architectural design in the hotel industry

The task of contemporary architecture and hotel interior design is to combine it with the story, message, external environment (i.e., horticultural design), comfort, acoustic features, atmosphere, and service of the hotel (Rogerson, 2010; Jablonska & Trocka-Leszczynska, 2019; Šker, 2023). It is essential to create a better environment on the premises through ambient lighting and plants, thereby creating a microclimate, to reduce heating and cooling costs. Inadequately designed spaces consume excessive energy to reach an optimal room temperature and are neither sustainable for the environment nor profitable for the investor. Many authors research aspects of sustainability and eco-efficiency of resources: energy, water, waste and discuss initiatives of optimisation (Juvan et al., 2023; Tirado et al., 2019; Pengpeng et al., 2015). In continuation, global institutions UNEP and UNWTO (2015) create a platform for sustainable and responsible decision-making, including spatial planning, tourist zones, and building strategies. Features of space, indigenous and local materials, and intangible storytelling of destinations, buildings, and people serve as inspiration for successful architectural and design projects in the hotel industry. As the contemporary hotel industry has abandoned the perception of the hotel as a uniform generic building of basic hospitality services, creativity and innovation are being sought

(Alidadi & Zadeh, 2016). These qualities are the platform for the competitiveness of architectural projects that are evaluated by the investor and finalised in time dynamics according to the feasibility studies and strategic plans (Adams, 2021)

When considering an investment project at famous locations, there are often existing structures that should be either preserved or demolished (Bondarenko et al., 2021). Therefore, cooperation with urban expert public bodies and the Department of Cultural Heritage Conservators is extremely important. Initiatives to merge and transform a historical building into a hotel often represent a successful integration of heritage and contemporary context (Dastbaz & Strange, 2016). In situations involving the planning and construction of new structures in populated urban destinations, communication with the local community contributes to understanding and the affirmation of added value. The goal of architectural and urban creativity is the realisation of spatial organisms that simultaneously satisfy quantitative and qualitative needs, psychological spheres of man, and social symbolism, stresses Penevska (2018) while elaborating on the competitiveness of innovative hotel architecture for the 21st century. A hotel with adequate structural strength, a purposeful arrangement of rooms, a subtle position in the environment, and an aesthetic shape harmoniously balanced with the whole can earn architectural epithets, points out Neidhardt (1997). He points out that it is important that architects have ecological and social empathy, and that they are creative, whereby they must meet three conditions: a new idea, i.e., statistically rare; secondly, that the idea is to a certain extent adaptable; and thirdly, that it is capable of preserving the original ideas that it brings to full expression through evaluation and elaboration.

Methodology

Data

After determining the aim of the research, which refers to the examination of the role of hotel architecture and design in the context of contemporary challenges, approaches to sustainability and emotional aspects on the competitiveness of the tourist offer and the design of research questions, the target group of examinees was defined - architects of hotel facilities, and the implementation of qualitative research. In this paper, the term 'architects' encompasses experts who consider the 'skeleton' and foundations of a building, including its structural stability, functionality, and safety, as well as design experts whose focus is on the 'soul' of a space, i.e., creating atmosphere, aesthetics, and user experience. The research was conducted on a sample of five architects who designed six well-known hotels on the Croatian coast. When selecting projects, consideration was given to the geographical distribution on the Croatian coast (Poreč, Krk, Zadar, Šibenik, Split, Hvar), tourist centres, different tourist brands, hotel complexes, and categorisation (4/5 stars at the beginning of the in-depth interview with each architect). Demographic characteristics were recorded and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the interviewed architects

Architect	Gender	Age	Work experience in architecture
Architect 1	F	(31-35) 34	10
Architect 2	M	(51 and more) 57	30
Architect 3	M	(51 and more) 78	41
Architect 4	M	(31-35) 35	12
Architect 5	F	(41-45) 45	20

Source: Authors' work

Based on the data from Table 1, it can be concluded that the respondents are three male and two female architects with an average age of 49.8 years and an average work experience in architecture of 22.6 years. The oldest architect is Architect 3, who is currently retired and 78 years old, with 41 years of architecture experience, while the youngest is Architect 1, who is 34 years old and has 10 years of architecture experience.

The sample can be understood as a purposive expert sample, selected to provide in-depth insight into professional perspectives on hotel architecture and design. Although the number of respondents is limited, their experience and involvement in recognised hotel projects make them relevant informants for an exploratory qualitative study. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalisable, but as contextually grounded insights into architects' design reasoning, professional priorities, and perceptions of contemporary hotel design challenges.

Analysis

Qualitative research took the form of reconnaissance research and used the examination method, namely data collection through interviews, yielding deeper insights and a broader range of data. Due to the specific nature of the mentioned profession in terms of the uniqueness and diversity of the projects, and the possibility of partial comparability of answers, the in-depth interview technique with structured questions was chosen. Conducting an in-depth interview involves several stages: from problematizing the topic and designing questions to conducting interviews, transcribing conversations, and analysing and reporting. Therefore, based on the researched literature, questions were developed and defined for conducting an in-depth interview (Table 2).

Table 2

Design of questionnaire and interview question (resume) – created and adapted according to scientific research

Motivation for project acceptance	Adams (2021), Kim et al. (2020), Penevska (2018)
Vision of an architectural project	Mustapić & Vlahov (2015), Čerović & Čomić (2011), Jablonska & Trocka-Leszczynska (2019)
Sustainability characteristics of the project	Uskoković (2014), Alidadi & Zadeh (2016)
Investors' perception, preferences and required changes in the project	Bondarenko & He (2021), Mustapić & Vlahov (2015)
New trends, innovations and experiences in hotel architecture	Asmara & Mohi (2016), Sterkenberg (2017), Puraprom & Danghkawkeaw (2022), Šker (2023),

Source: Authors' work

Respondents were primarily contacted by phone and asked to participate in the survey. The purpose of the research was explained, along with questions about data confidentiality and participant anonymity, followed by agreement on the availability of an appointment for an in-depth interview. The research was conducted from October 2023 to March 2024, and an interview questionnaire was used to collect qualitative data, which contained demographic questions and five open-ended questions, which were focused on the motivation for hotel design, project modifications, project vision, sustainability characteristics, emotional aspects of tourists' stay and elements of architecture and design when choosing a hotel.

The primary data obtained from the interview were recorded. During the interview, the questions were read to the interviewees, and the interview sequence was presented.

In-depth interviews lasted 31 to 52 minutes (Table 3), in accordance with recommendations on the duration of in-depth interviews, based on the general practice and methodology of qualitative research in the social sciences.

Table 3
Duration of in-depth interviews

Architect	Duration
Architect 1	56'20"
Architect 2	38'24"
Architect 3	45'20"
Architect 4	40'17"
Architect 5	52'43"

Source: Authors' work

In qualitative research, ensuring the validity and reliability of results can be challenging; however, several methods address this challenge. Denzin (1978) states that validity or credibility can be ensured by the method of triangulation, distinguishing four types of triangulation: the use of multiple methods, data sources, researchers, or theories. Furthermore, Merriam (2009) states that reliability or consistency can be achieved using triangulation methods, peer-examination or peer-review, researcher's position or reflexivity, whereby the researcher looks back to his assumptions and biases in the research, and audit trail, when the researcher describes in detail how the data was collected and categorised, and how the conclusions were reached. When analysing the data in this work, the methods of colleague review and researcher revision were used.

The NVivo 14 software package was used for data coding and analysis because automated content analysis can process large amounts of text faster than manual methods of literature synthesis (Roblek et al., 2020), as well as inductive and comparative methods.

In addition, the obtained data were processed using the content analysis method using the WordArt program. The frequency counts and word visualisations are used as supportive, illustrative tools to highlight recurring themes in the data, while the primary analytical focus remains on interpreting meanings, patterns, and relationships derived from qualitative coding.

Results

Motivation, challenges, and project vision

The following section describes the processing of the collected qualitative data. The question "What motivates you most when choosing to design a hotel?" aimed to identify key architectural and design factors that contribute to hotel competitiveness from the perspective of architects. By analysing the responses in Table 4, common themes such as challenges, history, brand, and public content can be identified.

Most respondents mention the challenge as a factor that attracted them to the hotel project; however, the sentence continues: the complexity of the project and the need to meet several criteria to successfully realise it. Accordingly, some of the respondents state: "It was a special challenge and honour to work on this project due to the design of the entire urbanism, interior, environment and different types of

buildings, not only hotels but also villas, annexes, castles, which are in an extremely important location for the city and form a unique functional spatial entity with a historical the core of the city" (Architect 5); "It was very challenging to work on both hotel complexes because they operate under the international hotel brand and require the fulfilment of many more criteria that should be invested in, in comparison with for example, a boutique hotel or a smaller hotel owned by a private person" (Architect 1). Several respondents emphasise the importance of the location's history and cultural identity, stressing the need for the hotel project to nurture history and contribute to the city's cultural life. Some consider the influence of local architecture and specific architectural styles on hotel design, and try to integrate local elements and characteristics into the project. Furthermore, they reflect on how historical events and a place's development can influence hotel design and create an authentic guest experience.

Table 4
Results of content analysis on hotel design motivation

Key word	Frequency of occurrence (number)	Frequency of occurrence (%)
Challenge	4	23,53 %
History / Historical Identity / Tradition	3	17,65 %
Brand	2	11,76 %
Public contents	2	11,76 %
Innovative approach	1	5,88 %
Anthology	1	5,88 %
Complexity	1	5,88 %
Location	1	5,88 %
Memory	1	5,88 %
Specifics	1	5,88 %

Source: Authors' work

Certain interviewees emphasise the hotel company's brand as a key motivator in hotel design. One respondent emphasises the importance of brand recognition and reputation in shaping hotel design and guest experience, while another states that brands set guidelines and standards that affect every aspect of the hotel, from architecture and interiors to services and experience. Therefore, when designing, respondents carefully align the design with the company's brand and target audience, ensuring brand consistency and recognition across all segments of the hotel experience.

Two interviewees emphasise that public facilities within the hotel are key to creating a lively, inclusive environment. One respondent stated that areas such as restaurants, cafes and congress halls not only provide additional services to guests, but also actively contribute to the hotel's economic success, emphasising: "Public spaces, of course, allow the investor a higher income on the one hand, while on the other hand the type of hotel becomes part of the community" (Architect 2). The respondent notes that these public spaces are open to the wider community, which enables the hotel to become an integral part of the local community and states: "The public cannot get to the room, but they can enter the hotel lobbies, which had a great tradition as social gathering space from the beginning of the last century until the time of socialism, when top hotels had a strong reputation for good restaurants, cafes, and congress spaces" (Architect 3). It can be concluded that through public facilities, the hotel becomes a place of meeting and interaction not only for hotel guests, but also for the

local population. This fosters mutual connection and the exchange of ideas, enriching the hotel experience and strengthening the community as a whole.

Considering the relationship between investors and architects, the next question is whether investors requested changes to the project and, if so, which ones, to understand the challenges the architects face that may ultimately be reflected in the hotel's design. All respondents stated that they had changes in the design of the hotel, emphasising: "Yes, according to the handover, the project was reduced by almost 30% (Architect 4)", "The design took two years, and the project was elaborated and adapted to the needs, wishes and new knowledge of the investor" (Architect 5). Some respondents believe that the changes in the projects are the result of the current situation, regulations, budgets, external influences, changes in the demands of investors, all to increase investor satisfaction and the needs and wishes of guests, i.e. increasing the hotel's competitiveness. Three respondents stated that the 3D visualisations of the projects they create represent opportunities to minimise changes. It is crucial to establish clear and open communication between investors and architects from the very beginning of the project. Regular meetings and discussions help clarify the investor's needs and expectations and facilitate the project's adaptation. In addition to aligning needs and expectations, Architect 2 states: "We are architects – a service industry ", but we are also creative, artistic and technically educated, and we have to satisfy all the technical things, and equally we have to satisfy our aspects, responsibility towards the city and the environment."

The next question concerns the architectural project's vision. All respondents emphasised the importance of realising the hotel project's vision and the satisfaction of conveying the initial ideas to fruition. In addition, they emphasize the need to design a functional and aesthetically attractive space that fits the investor's budget, stating: "We architects imagine beautiful things, but equally these things should be functional and should fit into the investor's budget", (Architect 1), and they emphasize the importance of integrating local elements and characteristics into the design of the hotel stating: "...use of natural materials, palette of Mediterranean colours". Also, the respondents look back on the specifics of the hotel's location and its surroundings, and how they adapted to these contextual factors in realising the project's vision. All respondents emphasise the importance of guest and investor satisfaction as the goal, and some note that they succeeded in creating a product well received by the public.

Sustainability in hotel design

The continuation of the interview focused on the question of the project's sustainability characteristics: "Which characteristics of sustainability are important when designing a hotel?" Respondents show a high level of awareness of the importance of sustainable design and practices in hotel design. Sustainability is a key consideration in their decisions. According to the answers, it can be concluded that the respondents referred exclusively to ecological sustainability, without considering that sustainable development encompasses economic, social, and environmental welfare policies (Pejić Bach et al., 2023). By processing the responses from Table 5, certain common words such as energy, materials, recycling, water, and solar panels can be extracted.

All respondents mentioned energy as a key factor in their responses on the project's sustainability. Some mentioned energy through solar panel production, some through savings, and some through smart room systems that reduced unnecessary energy consumption for air conditioning. At the same time, the respondents mentioned materials as a key word in the project's effectiveness, encouraging natural materials, EU-certified materials and materials that can be recycled, stating: "...the hotel brand

insists that all the materials that are installed can be recycled, for example, they do not want to use blackout fabrics - blackout fabrics because they are more difficult to recycle than decorative fabrics for curtains..." (Architect 1). Recycling follows a sequence of keyword occurrences. In addition to materials, recycling is associated with environmental responsibility and care in the answers of two respondents. The keyword 'water' occurs 4 times. Certain respondents emphasise the importance of using toilets with lower water flow rates, which help save water and reduce consumption. Also, the use of seawater in pools as an alternative water source is mentioned, which can contribute to the project's sustainability.

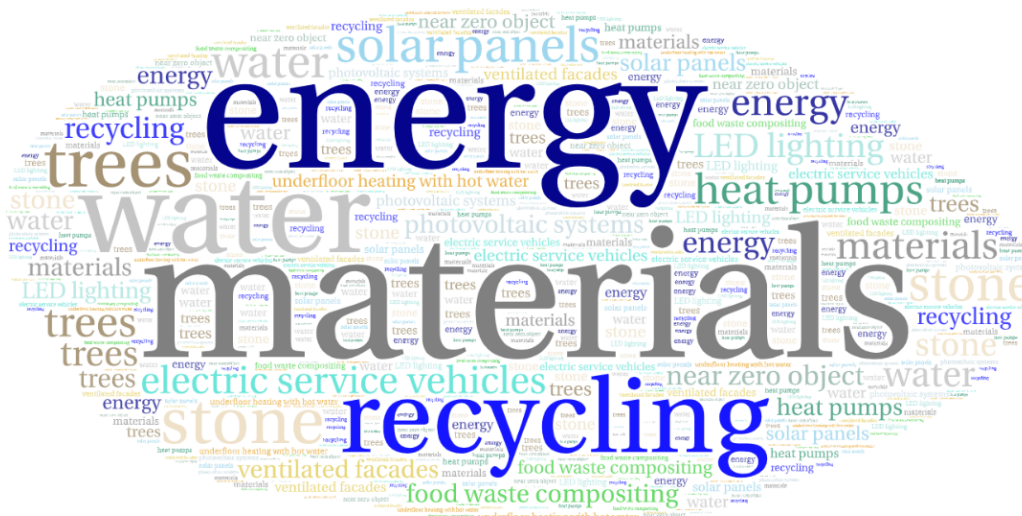
Table 5
Results of content analysis on project sustainability

Key word	Frequency of occurrence (number)	Frequency of occurrence (%)
Energy	5	15,63 %
Materials	5	15,63 %
Recycling	4	12,50 %
Water	4	12,50 %
Solar panels	2	6,25 %
Electric service vehicles	1	3,13 %
Food waste composting	1	3,13 %
Heat pumps	1	3,13 %
LED lighting	1	3,13 %
Near Zero Object	1	3,13 %
Photovoltaic elements	1	3,13 %
Savings	1	3,13 %
Smart room systems	1	3,13 %
Stone	1	3,13 %
Trees	1	3,13 %
Underfloor heating with hot water	1	3,13 %
Ventilated facades	1	3,13 %

Source: Authors' work

The results shown in Table 5 are illustrated in Figure 1, using WordArt to visually show the frequency of occurrence of certain words among respondents.

Figure 1
Frequency of occurrence of words related to project sustainability characteristics



Source: Authors' work

From the above data, we can conclude that the answers show a strong engagement of architects in creating sustainable hotels that not only meet the needs of guests and investors, but also respect environmental standards and promote environmental responsibility because they are aware that the impact of tourism on the environment is paradoxical – on the one hand, it harms the environment through high energy and water consumption, and on the other hand, the appeal of tourism relies heavily on the beauty of the landscape and untouched nature (Grèzes-Bürcher & Grèzes, 2024).

Emotional aspects in hotel design

When planning and designing a hotel, architects often have to consider a wide range of factors that shape the guest experience. Emotional aspects are one of the most important elements that can significantly influence the perception and experience of the stay. By asking the question "When planning and designing, do you think about the emotional aspects of the guests' stay in the hotel?" we wanted to gain insight into how much architects take into account the emotional needs and experiences of guests when planning and designing a hotel, because consideration of these aspects can result in the creation of a space that encourages positive emotions and experiences in guests, thereby increasing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the hotel on the market. All respondents emphasize the importance of emotional aspects in hotel design and indicate the importance of creating a space that will ensure a pleasant stay for the guest, stating: "It is important to create pleasant interiors, that provide the atmospheres that the user needs; whether it was a relaxing atmosphere, a calm - working atmosphere, a pleasant, intimate atmosphere in the bar, so all these things are incredibly important. If the space has bright white light, or faces the sea. However, the seating is oriented incorrectly, we as architects have not thought through the space and people will not want to stay there", (Architect 1). At the same time, three respondents state that other influences besides the visual space itself are important. One respondent state: "...the theme can be not only visual, but also tactile, emotion, sound, smell...sometimes you surprise guests that it is not just a chair beautiful and pleasant, but feel that it is wood and nature and that it evokes emotion", (Architect 2). By processing the answers (Table 6), common words can be extracted that affect guests' emotional experiences in the hotel, such as atmosphere, local identity, smell, sound, tactile elements, and texture.

Table 6
Results of content analysis on emotional aspects of the project

Key word	Frequency of occurrence (number)	Frequency of occurrence (%)
Atmosphere (quiet, comfort, relaxing, business, intimate, Mediterranean)	7	31,82 %
Local (identity, typology)	3	13,64 %
Scent	2	9,09 %
Sound (music)	2	9,09 %
Tactile elements	2	9,09 %
Texture (materials, space)	2	9,09 %
Brand	1	4,55 %
Colors	1	4,55 %
Lighting	1	4,55 %
Functionality	1	4,55 %

Source: Authors' research

The results shown in Table 6 are illustrated in Figure 2 using WordArt, which visually shows the frequency of occurrence of certain words among respondents.

Figure 2

Frequency of occurrence of words related to the impact of the project on the emotional aspects of the guests



Source: Authors' work

All interviewees repeatedly mention the atmosphere in their responses regarding the project's impact on guests' emotions. The importance of creating different atmospheres in the hotel, such as a calm, pleasant, relaxing, business or intimate atmosphere, which can affect the emotional experience of the guests, is emphasised. At the same time, local identity is mentioned by two interviewees as crucial in designing a hotel, and one interviewee states: "When designing, we try to give the guest an experience of the destination, by choosing characteristic local typologies and shapes, materials, colours, textures" (Architect 5). Creating a space that will stimulate the guests' senses and thus affect their emotions, four interviewees state, highlighting scent, sound, and touch. The importance of tactile sensations and material texture in creating a pleasant environment for guests is emphasised. In addition, some answers mention other aspects, such as brand, colours, lighting, and functionality, but these are less pronounced than the emotional aspects described above.

Desirable elements of architecture and design for hotel choice

Given that the appearance of a hotel today dominates the decision to choose one, the question of what architecture and design are in demand today was posed, with the aim of gaining key insights into guest preferences and market trends that can affect hotel competitiveness. All respondents agree that aesthetics and design play a key role in choosing a hotel; however, due to different guest preferences, choices vary, and there is general agreement on the importance of combining functionality and aesthetics in hotel design. Two respondents emphasise the importance of adapting architecture and design to local characteristics and inspiration from the environment: "Architecture is very different, specific, tied to the place where you do it. We design different buildings...in Rovinj we do it one way, in Osijek another, in

Table 7

Results of content analysis on elements of architecture and design when choosing a hotel

Theme	Key word	Frequency of occurrence (number)	Frequency of occurrence (%)
Aesthetic and design	Design	6	9,84 %
Aesthetic and design	Aesthetic	5	8,20 %
Aesthetic and design	Unique	5	8,20 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	Contemporary/modern	4	6,56 %
Functionality and comfort	Functionality	4	6,56 %
Local context and history	History	4	6,56 %
Local context and history	Culture	3	4,92 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	Innovative	3	4,92 %
Functionality and comfort	Quality	3	4,92 %
Aesthetic and design	Specific	3	4,92 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	Sustainability	3	4,92 %
Functionality and comfort	Comfortable	2	3,28 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	Ecology	2	3,28 %
Local context and history	Identity	2	3,28 %
Local context and history	Local	2	3,28 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	Technology	2	3,28 %
Aesthetic and design	Eclectic	1	1,64 %
Functionality and comfort	Interactive	1	1,64 %
Innovation and contemporary approaches	New elements	1	1,64 %
Functionality and comfort	Public spaces	1	1,64 %
Local context and history	Soul of the place	1	1,64 %
Functionality and comfort	Space for experience	1	1,64 %
Aesthetic and design	Strange	1	1,64 %
Aesthetic and design	"Wow" effect	1	1,64 %

Source: Authors' work

Aesthetics and design are the words that appear most frequently in the architects' responses. In addition to the above words, the theme of aesthetics and design also includes the words unique, specific, eclectic, strange, " and "wow" effect. Design, aesthetics, and uniqueness of a hotel are mentioned in almost all responses, indicating the importance of visual appeal, an aesthetic impression, and recognisable uniqueness that give a hotel character and set it apart from others, creating an unforgettable experience for visitors. Architect 1 particularly emphasises that he is attracted to hotels that have a strong aesthetic value and cause a "wow" effect, while Architect 4 mentions eclectic design, where the space evokes emotions. The theme of local context and history, along with the words local and history, also includes

culture, identity, and the soul of the place. Connections to a place's local context and history are also important elements in hotel design. Architect 3 emphasises the importance of connecting design with local identity and history, stating that architecture should reflect the soul of a place, while Architect 2 mentions his stay in a certain hotel in Istanbul because of its specificity and historical significance. The architects want the hotel to be not only aesthetically appealing but also grounded in the local cultural and historical environment. The topic of innovation and contemporary approaches includes the words contemporary, modern, innovative, sustainability, ecology, technology, and new elements. These words indicate a modern approach in architecture and design with an emphasis on ecological and technological aspects. Contemporary but sustainable designs that bring new, dynamic elements to the space and connect guests to the local environment are desirable, as stated by Architect 3: "Contemporary, innovative elements that create a unique atmosphere" and Architect 5: "I like hotels that successfully integrate sustainability into their design". Innovation, especially in terms of sustainability and contemporary approaches, is becoming crucial for architects who want hotel architecture and design to reflect progress and environmental responsibility. Functionality and comfort are described by the word's functionality, quality, comfortable, interactive, public spaces, and space for experience. Although aesthetic and innovative design are often emphasised, functionality and comfort also play important roles in hotel architecture and design. Terms such as functionality and quality are often used to emphasise that a hotel should be high-quality, practical to stay in, comfortable, and provide a "space for experiencing" (Architect 5). Comfort is mentioned in the context of designing a space that feels like "home", as emphasised by Architect 4. "Public spaces" that facilitate interaction between guests are also mentioned, indicating the importance of creating shared experiences in a hotel. Although architects value specificity and aesthetic appeal, comfort and functionality remain basic aspects that should not be neglected. Of all the elements mentioned, aesthetics and design stand out as the most frequently cited, while innovation and connection to the local context further enhance a hotel's attractiveness. Based on the analysis of the responses, architects prefer hotels that combine several key factors:

- Aesthetics – hotels that are visually appealing and evoke emotions, whether through minimalism or a wealth of details.
- Connection to the local context and history – hotels that reflect the soul of the place, connecting design with historical heritage.
- Innovation and sustainability – hotels that are not only contemporary, but also environmentally responsible.
- Functionality and comfort – while aesthetics and innovative design come to the fore, a hotel should be a functional and pleasant place to stay.

Architects prefer hotels that offer complex experiences that go beyond basic accommodation, including emotional connection, cultural aspects, and innovative design.

Discussion, implication, and conclusion

The paper aimed to explore the role of architecture and design in creating attractive hotels, with a particular emphasis on contemporary challenges, sustainability, emotional aspects and desirable elements of architecture and design in the hotel selection process. The research was conducted through in-depth interviews with five experienced architects. The research identifies specific challenges, professional motivations, key aspects of sustainability, emotional elements, and desirable characteristics of architecture and design when choosing a hotel.

Summary of findings

The analysis of the answers to the research questions yielded the following results.

Response to the first research question (RQ1) on the specific challenges and professional motivations that encourage architects to choose hotel design revealed the following. Architects are most motivated by professional challenges and the complexity of projects that require meeting several criteria and high standards, especially for brands of large hotel companies. They are also motivated by the opportunity to integrate local cultural and historical identity into the design and create an authentic experience for guests. Authors Mustapić & Vlahov (2015) also list the challenges that global demands for respect for the history and traditions of space, along with the rapid development of technology and innovative solutions, pose to architects and designers. Also, an important incentive is the hotel's public facilities, which enable connection with the local community, making the hotel a social and functional centre.

Investigation into the second research question (RQ2) on the key sustainability characteristics that architects integrate into hotel design indicated that sustainable design emphasises the integration of environmental elements such as energy efficiency, the use of natural and recycled materials, water conservation, and the implementation of renewable energy sources. Architects attach importance to creating spaces that reduce the ecological footprint while meeting the requirements of investors and users, in line with the findings of Jauhari and Verma (2014) and Mensah (2019). At the same time, authors Mustapić & Vlahov (2015) state that there is an increasing global demand for responsible environmental management in the hotel industry. Many other authors also explore aspects of sustainability and environmental efficiency of resources: energy, water, waste (Juvan et al., 2023; Tirado et al., 2019; Pengpeng et al., 2015) and state the importance of its implementation in hotel structures.

Interviews also provided insight into the third research question (RQ3) regarding the emotional aspects used in hotel design. Architects recognise emotional aspects as key to creating a pleasant and meaningful guest experience. Serhat (2020) also states that good hotel design can influence guests' emotions. The atmosphere of a hotel must respond to different emotional needs of users - from relaxing and peaceful to business or intimate, which is in line with previous research that states that when designing a hotel, a broader spectrum than the purely functional is considered and the focus is placed on how people experience the space (Imrie, 2003; Lee, 2015; Li & Zhang, 2017; Lee, 2022). The importance of local identity is also emphasised, as is the activation of guests' senses through textures, smells, sounds, and other elements that stimulate positive emotional reactions. The authors Mustapić & Vlahov (2015) also state that sensory marketing is becoming increasingly popular.

The fourth research question (RQ4) investigated the desirable elements of architecture and design, and the integral qualities that influence the choice of a hotel from the perspective of architects in the role of tourists. Aesthetics and design, local context and history, innovation and contemporary approaches, functionality and comfort are the most important elements that architects, in the role of tourists, consider desirable. The words unique, contemporary, culture, quality, sustainability, ecology, technology, eclectic, interactive, new elements, public spaces, soul of the place, space for experience, strange, and wow effect that hotels should have to be selected are also mentioned. Innovation as a characteristic of demand in the hotel industry is also mentioned by Alidadi & Zadeh (2016). Contemporary challenges and trends identified by Mustapić and Vlahov (2015) are significant because they can

contribute to increased hotel revenues, while the inclusion of culturally sensitive design elements increases guest satisfaction (Awoyifa et al., 2024).

Contributions and limitations

The paper fills a gap in the academic literature by providing a deeper understanding of architecture and hotel design, with an emphasis on integrating functional, emotional, and aesthetic aspects. At the same time, the research highlights the importance of the internal experience of architecture and its impact on guests' emotional needs, an area that has so far been insufficiently researched in scientific circles. The results provide a platform for future research on new sources of competitiveness in the hospitality industry. The research contributes to the theoretical understanding of the impact of architecture and design on the experience of space and hotel selection. The practical contribution is reflected in useful guidelines for architects, designers, and hoteliers who want to improve their projects and serve as a guide for creating spaces that not only look visually impressive but also integrate historical context, culture, emotional experiences, and innovative approaches. In addition, emphasising the importance of sustainability and environmentally responsible design can encourage the adoption of sustainable practices in the hospitality industry, thereby further contributing to the development of modern, environmentally conscious hotel spaces. At the same time, investors can better understand the importance of balancing vision, budget, and the functional requirements of the space.

Although the research provides valuable insights into architects' architectural and design preferences, it has some limitations. The sample of respondents is relatively limited and specific, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Namely, the participating architects came from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Furthermore, the subjective nature of the responses may include individual preferences that are not necessarily representative of the entire population of architects. Another limitation is the qualitative analysis, which may leave room for different interpretations of the data. For further research, it is recommended to expand the sample to include more architects and different geographical regions, enabling broader generalisation of the results. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods could provide a deeper understanding of preferences and practices in hotel design, allowing better insight into different aspects of the design process. Also, focusing on specific sustainability elements, such as smart technologies and energy-efficient solutions, would become crucial for understanding future directions in hotel architecture.

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