Heritage Boutique Hotels as ‘Experienscapes’: Three Views from Singapore

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Abstract: More than just the transaction of services, tourism has been viewed through the lenses of experience - the production and marketing of experiences to travelers, followed by the consumption of and repeat demand for those same experiences. Experiential landscapes include theme parks, shopping malls, festival marketplaces and increasingly utilitarian service environments like restaurants and hotels. This paper explores hotels as a crucial element in the tourism experience economy. Specifically, it considers how boutique hotels function as ‘experienscapes’ - landscapes where experiences are created, consumed but also ultimately contested. The empirical material draws on the boutique hotel phenomenon in Singapore wherein three different social-cultural groups are implicated: (a) the hotel worker who stages the experience but also undergoes a personal experience of his/her own in creating the environment; (b) the guest who experiences the hotel as an extension of their individuality and identity; and (c) the neighbor/resident who lives or works within the vicinity of the hotel, and for whom the hotel represents a cultural experience that is not always positive nor welcome. The triple-fold view provides a holistic insight on boutique hotels and a conceptual approach to understanding both the triumphs of and challenges facing the experience economy.

Keywords: boutique hotels, experiences, heritage, landscapes, Singapore

Introduction

It is a truism to say that tourism is part of an ‘experience economy’. More than just the transaction of services, tourism has increasingly been viewed through the lenses of experience - the production and marketing of experiences to travelers, followed by the consumption of and hopefully repeat demand for those same experiences over the life-course of the consumer. Experiences are staged in places such as theme parks, shopping malls, festival marketplaces and increasingly utilitarian service environments like restaurants, transportation modes and hotels. More than just a business undertaking, the selling of
experiences is fundamental to customer engagement, product enhancement and place making in contemporary tourism (Chang and Huang 2014).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, p. 98), economic systems have evolved from the extraction of resources (agrarian economy) to the manufacturing of goods (industrial economy), delivery of services (service economy) and now, the staging of experiences (experience economy). This is not to say that preceding economic systems have been eclipsed but rather that new offerings are overlain atop each other in an increasingly multi-layered production and consumption process. Hence, experiences can be enjoyed alongside thoughtful delivery of services, and the consumption of goods and resources are enhanced when customer experiences are positive. The concept of ‘experience as commodity’ first emerged in the late 1990s to describe a heightened state of service delivery and consumption. Beyond ‘consistently high level of product and service quality’, demanding consumers now look for something extra that will distinguish them as discriminating consumers, while business operators search out opportunities to differentiate their product/service in a crowded marketplace (Oh et al. 2007). Some restaurants, for example, are no longer content to just offer excellent food and service, but also to stage experiences that involve learning about where the ingredients come from, bringing diners to local marketplaces and preparing their own food. Experience has become a value-adding means to enhance already high quality goods and services, elevating consumers and producers to a more sophisticated level of transaction.

This paper explores hotels as a crucial element in the tourism experience economy. It considers how boutique hotels stage experiences through what might be called ‘experienscapes’. Boutique hotels may be defined as small, independently-owned hotels with a strong emphasis on personal service and high staff-guest ratio. With their focus on design, architecture and guest experiences, they have often been described as lifestyle enterprises (Horner and Swarbrooke 2004; McIntosh and Siggs 2005; Shaw 2014). The concept of experiencescape is chosen as it broadens our perspectives on boutique hotels beyond economics (signified by the noun ‘economy’) to include social, cultural and personal realms as well (as reflected by the suffix ‘-scape’). Experienscapes offers a way to focus on what happens to experiences in tourism spaces - how they are consciously created, strategically consumed but also highly contested. The empirical material draws on the boutique hotel phenomenon in Singapore wherein three different social-cultural groups are
implicated: (a) the hotel worker who stages experiences but also undergoes an experience of his/her own in creating the environment; (b) the guest who experiences the hotel as an extension of their individuality and personal identity; and (c) the neighbor/resident who lives or works within the vicinity of the hotel, and for whom the hotel represents a cultural experience that is not always positive nor welcome. In the conclusion, the theoretical and policy implications on researching tourism experienscapes are discussed.

**Conceptualizing Tourism Experienscapes**

In an experience economy, consumers look for four types of experiences. They include entertainment (amusement as a form of experience), education (learning something new through active participation), escapism (doing something new) and esthetics (immersing in an environment) (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The final realm of ‘esthetics’ has a particular geographical resonance and refers to experiences derived from deep engagement with an environment or physical setting. In marketing literature, such an immersive environment is described as possessing ‘atmospherics’ (Bitner 1992) and ‘ambience’ (Allen 2006 cited in Adey 2008b), a spatial quality that constitutes a key experience in itself rather than space serving as a neutral backdrop in which to enjoy other experiences.

The notion of ‘landscape as experience’ is nothing new when we consider iconic scenic sites or built environments. The Grand Canyon’s natural awe or Borobudur’s captivating architecture are landscape experiences in and by themselves, without the need for further experiences added to the mix. What is novel about experience economy research, however, is the contention that non-iconic, quotidian landscapes can also serve as portals for transcendental experiences. As ensembles of different components, of which the scenic/visual is but one element, any sensitively-designed environment can offer opportunities for experiences. Experiential landscapes thus derive meaning from a combination of economic activities (meaningful production and consumption), social properties (how people relate with others in the environment), cultural elements (historical associations of the site) and idiosyncratic personal characteristics (how people imbue their own meanings and intentions onto the landscape which might differ significantly from that of its creators).
In the edited book Experienscapes, Tourism, Culture and Economy (O’Dell and Billing 2005), experienscapes are defined as the material base upon which experiences are anchored. Best epitomized by retail stores, museums, shopping malls, theme parks and even urban neighborhoods, these stylized landscapes are ‘strategically planned, laid out and designed’ by a host of economic and cultural agents including planners, architects, designers and place marketers (O’Dell 2005, p. 16). Inspired by Appadurai’s (1990) coinage of ‘ethnoscapes’, ‘ideoescapes’, ‘mediascapes’, ‘finanscapes’ and ‘technoscapes’, the suffix ‘scape’ is added to underscore the transnational flows and processes through which people and ideas move. Hence when Appadurai talks about ethnoscapes, he refers to places associated with immigrants, exiles, guest workers, tourists and other mobile groups examples of which range from ethnic districts to refugee camps and even airports and bus terminals. When he writes about mediascapes, he is similarly thinking of the production and dissemination of narratives and images that transcend borders, creating a shared information field around the world.

The emphasis on movement, mobility and openness is particularly appealing to tourism writers as they think about the fluidity of landscapes shaped by and for tourism purposes. The concept of ethnoscape, for example, has been used by different tourism writers to reframe the traditional notion of cultural areas. Instead of tightly territorialized and spatially bounded spaces, cultural landscapes are increasingly conceived as environments in which multiple cultures - dominant and subordinate, age-old and recently-transplanted - co-mingle in spaces that are always in flux. Razak (2007), for example, applied the concept to explain Aruba’s cultural complexity and argues that what attracts tourists to the island is its interplay of cultures across space and time rather than a singular cultural identity. In a similar vein, Shaw et al. (2004) explored London’s Brick Lane and Green Street as multi-cultural ethnoscapes rather than mono-cultural neighborhoods, arguing that a large part of their tourism appeal is their ‘openness’ as cosmopolitan landscapes. Tourism writers have also toyed with the ‘scape’ suffix to coin new terms. Apart from ‘experienscapes’, a noteworthy coinage is ‘heritage-scape’ (Di Giovine 2008). In his study of UNESCO’s global agendas, Di Giovine interprets world heritage sites as more than just historic spaces but ideological environments for the spreading of global peace. These environments are also inherently political and the idea of a ‘landscape’ is supposed to foreground the contingent and at times contested nature of the inscription process and resultant mass
tourism that occurs at World Heritage Sites. Heritage-scapes are not static heritage sites but landscapes where heritage is constantly being re-produced, consumed, questioned and reinterpreted by different local stakeholders and people around the world.

Inspired by Appadurai and discourses dealing with ‘scapes’, our understanding of experienscapes is similarly informed by the relentless open nature of tourism environments as well as their contested nature. Experienscapes are consciously planned and produced but also lived, consumed and contested. On the one hand, experienscapes are “thought about and created” by architects and planners as they assert their “wills and ideas over space”; on the other, spaces are appropriated by users who “work and rework the world around them and imbue it with (new) meaning in the process” (O’Dell 2005, p. 18). The study of experienscapes must thus reckon with the different and often competing dimensions of place as perceived by different people. In Gyimothy’s study of Danish ‘kros’, for example, she demonstrates how country inns reflect ‘competing forms of identity that are linked to issues of class and national belonging, as well as popular perceptions (and representations) of cultural heritage and notions of “home”’ (O’Dell 2005, p. 23). As ‘nostalgiascapes’, the inns derive symbolic power from romanticized images of Danish hospitality and rural charm, and serve as collective social sites for innkeepers, rural communities and guests in need of food and shelter. Changing times and the onslaught of tourism, however, have led some kro owners to upgrade their image, transforming the inns into consciously styled tourism sites. A more elegant setting and sophisticated menus (as well as removal of pinball machines) may attract more tourists but have also made some locals feel unwelcome and out of place. Instead of local fare, some kros now feature international cuisines - sangria, olive oil and other culinary delights of Italy, France and Spain - a case of ‘snobbing up’ which one innkeeper fears as being ‘too fine and too French... too high... too pretentious’ for its traditional guests (Gyimothy 2005, p. 121).

Experienscapes are not simply about ‘satisfying need’ (economic survival, employment, services) but also ‘fulfilling aspirations, desires and dreams’ (Willim 2005, p. 203). In the post-industrial city, these aspirations often include higher order demands for arts and culture which urban planners strive to meet in the form of museums, heritage infrastructure and new hotels. Christerdotter (2005) for example, examined how a Frank Gehry-designed hotel prominently
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located along Malmo’s (Sweden) waterfront was conceived by municipal planners and cultural elites as a hopeful symbol in fulfilling demands in arts and design. Similarly the conversion of industrial spaces into museums and new enterprises, such as Newcastle’s BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, is seen as part of a larger project in urban ‘aestheticization and culturalization’ aimed at fulfilling experiential needs for creativity (Willim 2005, p. 41). However, as experiences and aspirations are personal, what one regards as important might not be construed as such by another. Christerdotter (2005, p.100) recognizes that while the Gehry hotel was envisioned by planners as a metaphor for a culturally resurgent Malmo, for many residents it is seen as a ‘symbol of inequality, a playground for rich people and a monument depicting increasing social gaps’. In what she calls ‘hotales’ (hotel tales), it is therefore important to uncover different narratives about the hotel to acknowledge the manifold experiences embedded within a single experienscape. These hotales represent ‘different facets of reality’, each very real and legitimate to its storyteller (Christerdotter 2005, p. 104).

This research on Singapore similarly attempts to uncover hotales from multiple viewpoints - owners/workers and what they intend of their hotels, and how these intentions are mediated by their guests and neighborhood residents. For the owner, the hotel might serve as an outlet for her creative expression or provide a second career field motivated by personal passion. For an employee, it may present an opportunity for him to enact a long-cherished dream of being a cultural ambassador to tourists or perhaps just a job to fulfil economic needs. For patrons and guests, staying in a hotel can serve as a means of self-discovery, identity-formation or making a statement about oneself and one’s lifestyle choices (de Klumbis 2003). More than just a brand, the hotel has a ‘brand personality’ that expresses the character of the business and the people running and also the ‘personality, tastes and lifestyle of the ideal customer’ (Johns and Gyimothy 2008, p. 269). However, this study also presents an alternative (and more dystopian) view of the hotels from those who ‘un-experience’ them. Long-time residents and workers in neighborhoods suddenly populated with hotels may have different experiences of the hotels compared to those who create and consume them as part of the leisure economy. It is thus argued that avoidance and ‘non-experience’ also constitute legitimate forms of place experience, presenting a different hotale from that of willing guests and paying patrons.
As a modern tourism destination, Singapore is home to many medium and large-size business hotels with at least 200 guest rooms. Boutique hotels are an exception although since the late 1990s, a few hotels have emerged outside the key commercial zones of Orchard Road and the Central Business District. Boutique hotels are typically small (less than 100 rooms) and emphasize personal service and high staff-guest ratio (Teo et al. 1998; McIntosh and Siggs 2005). Usually located in historic neighborhoods, many are independently owned as opposed to being part of a transnational chain. Although they cannot boast of a swimming pool, business center and meeting rooms, their emphasis on unique architecture and distinctive design has meant a loyal and niche following of tourists and style-conscious patrons (de Klumbis 2003; Horner and Swarbrooke 2004). Based on these criteria, there are no more than 35 boutique hotels in Singapore mostly found in Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India and other historic precincts. The data derived in the paper extend from a long-term study of heritage-themed hotels in Singapore and Malaysia that began in 2006. Over ten boutique hotels in Singapore were studied in the first phase of research (2006 - 2008), and more recently in 2011 - 2014, another six new hotels were included in the study (followed by repeat visits to those earlier studied). Site visits were accompanied by interviews with hotel owners, general managers, public relations officers and hotel staff; often, two or more representatives from each property were interviewed. Hotel guests and restaurant patrons, as well as neighborhood residents in Chinatown were also approached for their opinions. Drawing heavily from extensive interviews, the experiential narratives quoted in this paper hope to offer multiple perspectives on Singapore’s boutique hotels as they are simultaneously created, consumed and contested.

Creating Experiences: Hotel Work as Learning Experience

Boutique hotels may be studied as experienscapes in three ways: through the experiential work of owners/employees in producing hotel landscapes; via the experiences of hotel guests/patrons during their sojourn; and finally, from the experiences of neighborhood residents/workers who encounter the hotels in the course of daily living. The three perspectives of ‘creation’, ‘consumption’ and ‘contestation’ offer an insight into how experienscapes are differentially implicated in the lives of different stakeholders in the city. In the experience economy literature, a case is often made of hotels offering unique experiences that help guests learn more about a foreign culture and
its people (Ypma 1999; Horner and Swarbrooke 2004; McIntosh and Siggs 2005). While this theme is tenable in Singapore too, I wish to extend the concept of experienscape in a different direction. What is worth exploring is how the creation of an experienscape serves as an experience for the creators themselves. Indeed, with most of Singapore’s boutique hotels located in buildings in historic neighborhoods, the very experience of adaptive reuse and architectural restoration have been vividly described by hotel workers as the most challenging in their professional lives.

The experienscapes of Singapore’s boutique hotels thus begin with the very act of restoration and construction. Hotel owners and managers speak of the difficulties involved in conserving buildings and adhering to government regulations on permissible alterations (exterior and interior) as part of the work. A common refrain is that URA’s (Urban Redevelopment Authority) conservation rules prevent them from doing what ‘normal’ hotels would usually take for granted such as installing signs, painting exterior walls and designing windows. The public relations manager at Porcelain Hotel (Figure 1) described the daunting experience of historic conservation thus:

**Figure 1.** Porcelain Hotel in Singapore’s Chinatown. Source: the author.
Working with the state also presents unexpected challenges. According to the owner of Jayleen Best Western hotel, she undertook independent research on the title deeds of historic buildings adjacent to her hotel to convince the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) on the need to ‘top-up’ building and land leases. Incurring time and personal expenses, she recounted her testy relationship with the SLA as part of the challenge of working on a historic building:

I told them to top up the lease. In order to rebuild this building, I had to spend four, five million dollars. No decent, rational businessman will do anything like this with the lease only 20 years. If left undone, the building will be an eyesore in the cityscape. And they told me if they will top up my lease to 30 years. I said, “What rubbish”. If I spend so much, it is not worth doing it with such a short lease. I had no choice but to do research on the whole street. I told SLA all the title deeds were different… They said no such thing in Singapore, and I said I did my research and asked them to check. They were shocked.

Not just for the hotel owner, urban gentrification also presents a learning experience for government authorities.

Overcoming state regulations requires creative adaptation. The restrictions on windows noted earlier had forced some owners and designers to create ‘alternative’ inner worlds within the hotels. At least four boutique hotels have turned to local art to conjure colors, vistas and sceneries in the absence of exterior windows and views. The showcasing of Singaporean art is, however,
as much an overcoming strategy as it is a way to also publicize culture to an international audience. Indeed, boutique hotels often brand themselves as custodians of local art in different ways. The New Majestic hotel in Chinatown (Figure 2), for example, had a ‘Local Artists for a Local Hotel’ program in which sculptures and paintings by Singaporean artists are prominently displayed throughout the property. A brochure was also created to detail the artists and their works. The Clover Hotel’s corporate social responsibility scheme is called ‘Clover Ready for Art’. According to its public relations manager, the goal is to support fledgling Singaporeans artists by providing them ‘free’ exhibition spaces. With international guests staying at the hotel, it is hoped that local art will receive some global attention:

![New Majestic Hotel](image)

**Figure 2.** New Majestic Hotel. Source: the author.
Our CEO felt that Singapore lacks spaces for artists, especially aspiring artists. So, he wanted to use this hotel as a platform for local artists to showcase their talent. Rather than buying sculptures, we rather have artists come and paint on our walls. This is our platform and we recently launched our corporate social responsibility which is called ‘Clover Ready to Art’. It is a platform where we invite local and international artists to showcase their works at our four properties. So, to us, art is a very big subject.... we want to bring the public and the artist together so that they will have a chance to express themselves to the public who would really appreciate their work.

That Singapore is developing itself as a ‘Renaissance City for the Arts’ (MITA, 2000) also fits well with the hotels’ cultural pursuits. Curating artists, collaborating on wall designs and staging artist-audience events are part of the experience of boutique hotel-making as much as it is a national cultural project.

In Shaw’s (2014) research on tourism businesses, he highlights an increasing trend towards small-scale entrepreneurs since the 2000s, especially artisans specializing in lifestyle offerings. Small, independently-owned hotels may be perceived as part of this phenomenon with their offerings of homey cuisines, hospitality and vernacular architecture to culturally-conscious guests. Singapore’s boutique hotels epitomize this lifestyle trend as well in their advocacy of local design talents. The owner of Wanderlust Hotel, for example, explained his decade-long experiment with different architects and interior designers. The Wanderlust (Figure 3) is his third boutique property in Singapore and the culmination of efforts in promoting local talent. One of his earlier hotels (New Majestic) was designed by a fledgling local interior design company with no prior hotel experience. His latest venture, the Wanderlust, saw four different local companies hired to design each floor of the hotel in completely different styles. He described his life philosophy of pushing boundaries and making each new project more challenging for himself and his designers:
For me I guess [with] each project, there is also an attempt to do something different. Push boundaries a little bit and also the process involved - the designers you engage, the building you get, all these things have an effect…. For me, I am not especially interested in cohesion, things don’t really always need to match each other that well. I like a bit of chaos, this project is a bit chaotic…. In many ways, learning a lesson.

Fueled by passion and personal beliefs, lifestyle-oriented entrepreneurs describe their work in philosophical terms. For the Wanderlust, the owner’s philosophy to ‘go local’ was born from his experiences working with Singaporean talents and the conviction that ‘local flavor’ is important in conservation. As he declared, ‘We always wanted to work with local design firms, whether artist or architect, simply because I like my hotel to have a
strong local message, a strong local flavor. Context wise, local designers have a much stronger sense of what is relevant in terms of design and programs for buildings in Singapore’.

The value of ‘local flavor’ and ‘context’ is apparent in other ways. Personal experience is emphasized as a necessary component in developing boutique hotels. At Moon at Dickson hotel, for example, its relation manager explained that she visited many small hotels in Singapore to learn about housekeeping, staffing, sales and marketing matters. Although rivals, the camaraderie among local boutique hotels is a strong one based on co-operation and a mutual interest in growing the lifestyle market. In her words, ‘The hotel industry is very small, you know the people, so friends don’t mind showing us around. Or it’s mutual, you come and see [our hotel], and we go there as well’. At the Wanderlust, designing the hotel brochure was also an experiential endeavor. Unlike a standard pamphlet, the Wanderlust’s is a booklet featuring recommendations of attractions, services and eateries around Little India. To ensure experiential authenticity, the hotel’s communications team personally ‘trialed’ it out. Putting the brochure together was described by its relations officer as an experiential journey:

In our itinerary book, we have places to eat, do around the hotel and our staff actually went through the same journey as we put the book together. So, we wanted the guest to experience the same thing. ‘Wanderlust’ itself means the innate desire to travel. So that’s what we try to encompass within the hotel, before they check in, after they check in, constantly exposing them to new wonders of travelling.

The nature of work in the experience economy has often been described as aesthetic labor. In a tourism setting, such work demands skill sets of ‘emotional and aesthetic dimensions’ in which workers exercise their ‘experiential intelligence’ (Baum 2006, p. 124). More than just content knowledge, workers also possess in-depth understanding and skills born from personal experience. In Singapore’s boutique inns, aesthetic labor is evident in the way that hotel work is the outcome of tacit knowledge and encounters. To deliver compelling products, hotel owners and staff draw on individual challenges, lifestyle
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choices and cultural encounters. Such ‘life’ exposure enable the staff to be ‘able to place themselves, experientially and emotionally, in the shoes of their customers’ (Baum 2006, p. 133). Creating the experiential product is therefore very much a personal experience for the creators and workers. How the end-user perceives the product and further augments it with his/her own personal experiences is an issue we will now explore.

Consuming Experiences: Hotels as Statements of Personal Identity

Boutique hotels attract both foreign and local guests interested in cuisines, cultures and lifestyles (McIntosh and Siggs 2005). In experiential environments, participants are interested, however, in more than just meeting basic needs but engaging in opportunities for self-expression and identity-formation. In their study of experiential museums in Taiwan, Sheng and Chen argue that experience seekers are no longer content on ‘listening to stories’ but in actively participating in and meaningfully co-creating their own activities (Sheng and Chen 2012, p. 55). The same can also be said of other experiencapes. In this section, we consider how Singapore’s boutique hotels offer more than just a satisfactory meal or a good night’s rest, but also meeting the aspirational needs of its guests. By choosing to experience a boutique hotel, the guest is connecting with the hotel’s ‘brand personality’ which in turn amplifies their own ‘personality, tastes and lifestyle’ (Johns and Gyimothy 2008, p. 269). The choice of one’s hotel is therefore very much a statement of self-expression, identity and fulfillment (de Klumbis 2003).

Singapore’s boutique hotels are popular with both culture-seeking tourists and local ‘stay-cationers’. When asked about their choice, tourists invariably compare boutique inns to international business-chain hotels. If the experience of a modern hotel is business-like and predictable, that of a boutique hotel is unique and unpredictable. With their distinctive room configurations and designs, and location in quaint neighborhoods, novelty-seeking travelers are particularly enthralled by the boutique experience. A Greek tourist interviewed explained that he chose a Chinatown boutique hotel because he was looking for something different on his return visit:
I visited Singapore for the third time when I chose to stay at a boutique hotel. During my earlier visits, I stayed at international hotels on Orchard Road. Boutique hotels enhance the magic of being in a different place, especially if the themes reflect the culture. It adds the unique message from the person who designed each room, which keeps the guest discovering details and wondering during the stay…. I think the hotels [that] guests choose reflect their personality. I would say those who choose boutique hotels are more adventurous, in a sense that you don’t really know what you get, what you will feel and look at.

With a particular interest in Asian cultures and historic architecture, his choice of The Scarlet (with design references to illicit romance in Chinatown; Figure 4) suited him well. Wandering through the hotel’s narrow corridors, enjoying the views of back-lanes and alleyways from its dipping-pool and rooftop bar, and sampling its in-house ‘Sensually Yours’ music-CD allowed him to fully indulge both his cultural predilections and adventurous streak.
Tourists self-identify with particular hotel themes and images, and choose according to the lifestyle that a hotel advocates. As with the Greek tourist above, a French visitor described himself as a ‘savvy’ and ‘in-depth’ traveler who is always discovering something new even in places he has visited before. While international chains like Hilton and Marriot appeal to those preferring consistent standards and amenities, boutique hotels cater to those looking for surprises and creative expression. The latter appeals to his quest for something different:

> Yes, I love boutique hotels and their themes. I’m a savvy traveler, have a style of my own, so these boutique hotels suit me. Chain hotels don’t suit me, they are not expressive and not in-depth as Chinatown’s boutique hotels. Not all the rooms are the same, different layout, different names. Hotel 1929 and New Majestic do well in these [respects]. Their targeted audience is people like me, tempting me to try each different room. Chain hotels don’t offer me this excitement.

Yet another French visitor noted that boutique hotels have unusual names and are located in ‘authentic locations’, appealing to those with a penchant for the exotic and alternative. Staying at the former Royal Peacock or 1929 hotels, both located in what was once a renowned brothel area, allows such visitors to indulge in ‘discovery, adventures and new initiatives’ even in the heart of a modern city (Boswijk et al. 2006, p. 2).

Boutique hotels have also proven popular with Singaporean ‘stay-cationers’ looking for a weekend respite without the hassle of leaving the country. However, more than just a place to unwind, boutique hotels with their emphasis on ‘heritage’, ‘trendiness’ and ‘design’ have become performative sites for guests to project their interest or identity. There are two types of local guests: those seeking boutique hotels for their ‘hip’ factor and those with a penchant for historic architecture. A Singaporean professional interviewed explained that she patronizes boutique hotels because ‘it’s a place to be seen’. Trendy restaurants such as Ember (at 1929) and Cocotte (at Wanderlust) are popular with in-crowds working in adjacent financial districts. Patronizing a boutique hotel thus has a symbolic resonance in her opinion:
It’s hip to be seen hanging around these places. It’s a place to be seen and to see… [The typical patron] has to be willing to spend that amount of money to patronize the restaurants. When I look around, it seems to me that the diners all have the disposable income to spend.

Defined by their price range, aesthetics and culinary offerings (usually international western food), boutique hotels attract and perpetuate a clientele eager to bask in their exclusive image.

Market segmentation is an essential part of the boutique hotels’ niche-marketing strategy. Apart from the professional management class, self-professed trendsetters are also attracted to the hotels. For example, while the New Majestic appeals to architectural buffs, the Clover Hotel caters to art aficionados. A Singaporean hairstylist who was interviewed explained that he was attracted to the Scarlet because of its explicit high-fashion theme. His choice to stay there is as much a reflection of his creative background as it is a desire to be surrounded by inspirational beauty:

Different boutique hotels create different themes to attract a niche market. I believe these themes reflect an attitude, a trendy environment, style, a very personal approach to their customers. The small threshold of Scarlet means a very personal approach. It gives me a feeling of differentness and uniqueness. I’m involved in a trade that relates to fashion and trends. So, Scarlet’s high fashion and trendiness gives inspiration for me to style peoples’ hair better.

Indeed, ‘inspiration’ was a common experience among Singaporean guests. Two other local interviewees also described their hotel experiences as inspirational. One interviewee reminisced that his grandfather once lived in a shophouse and he had regretted not taking photographs of the place. Staying at the New Majestic and 1929 hotels provided a way for him to assuage his pangs while inspiring him to learn more about Singapore’s architectural heritage. Another guest explained her lifelong desire to own a pre-war shophouse; she stayed at the Scarlet to experience shophouse living with the possibility of designing her home along the same line. Her hotel sojourn and her search for a new home mapped onto each other in a seamless life experience:
I think we chose Scarlet because we liked the idea of converting and conserving something old and staying in a place that’s quaint and has character. One thing that comes to mind is that when we were house-hunting, we actually set out to look for small three-room flats built in the eighties rather than the newest built-to-order sort of HDB flats. My personal dream home is an old shophouse, so I suppose that is why Scarlet attracted me in the first place.

As experiential landscapes, Danish kros (historic inns) are viewed as particular forms of ‘nostalgiascapes’ (Gyimothy 2005). While hotel creators set the scene with appropriate architecture and design cues, it is up to their guests to endorse or reject these themes as symbols of Danish tradition and hospitality. Not for them therefore guests who are merely looking for a place to lay their heads, but participative patrons with a “cognitive or emotional attachment to the place, era or people within the topical context” (Gyimothy 2005, p. 113). Staying in a heritage hotel is much more than just a longing for the past but a firm sense of belonging to and in it. In Singapore, heritage boutique hotels similarly cater to a lifestyle community who identifies with the hotels in deeply personal and experiential ways. The hotels are extensions of their personality, values and life experiences, and in the case for some, even inspirational narratives for future living. Hotels are thus examples of environments built on and for personal experience and individual lifestyles (de Klumbis 2003). However, the emphasis on ‘personal’ and ‘individual’ also remind us that different people have differing hotalas (Christerdotter 2005) and that boutique guests are a self-selecting group with obvious purchasing power. How these hotels are viewed by neighborhood residents with no choice in the matter must therefore occupy our attention in the final discussion.

**Contesting Experiences: Neighborly Reflections of Hotels**

As boutique hotels emerged in Chinatown and Little India in the 2000s (Davison 2011), new activities and people have been introduced to the neighborhoods. The data so far have offered a generally positive view of the changing environment as experienced by people who welcome the hotels. In this section, we consider an alternative group whose relationship to place stems from their time-cherished bonds with a neighborhood. Focusing specifically on Chinatown, interviews with residents and workers (some of whom have stayed/worked in the area for 50 to 60 years) reveal an *experience of loss* as
familiar sights give way to gentrified buildings and new land uses. A corollary to this is a sense of non-experience as people regard the hotels as irrelevant in their life and therefore places to be avoided.

The emergence of boutique hotels has brought in more tourists to Chinatown. However, long-time residents of and workers in the neighborhood also bemoan the demise of familiar coffee shops, cinemas and street festivals catering to residents and the working class. The life as they know it is no more and the collective experience is one of loss and nostalgia. Consider what a former resident of Chinatown of over 60 years had to say about changes he has witnessed:

I feel Keong Saik Road is not as carefree and good as before. Not crowded as before too. I prefer the old Chinatown. The present Chinatown is not Chinatown in some sense anymore, it’s too touristy with all the hotels. In the past, Keong Saik Road was full of buzz during the festive period, like during the Seventh Month and Mooncake festival. You can really see people engaging in these festivals with items like hell notes and mooncakes. Now, it is not the case. So few people in Keong Saik now, just the few stray cats on the streets.

The experience of dislocation is particularly stark for those with no tangible connection to the newly established hotels. Even for coffee shop owners who might ostensibly benefit from the presence of tourists, new government regulations on conservation have transformed working conditions. The manager of Wan Ting Eating House and a Chinatown resident for over 20 years ruefully recalls the ‘carefree’ working environment of the past when there were fewer tourists and hotels around:

I don’t deny there are more tourists patronizing the coffeeshops now. But if you compare to the past, it was much easier to operate a coffeeshop. We could extend the tables and chairs to the pathway, but now it cannot be done. The government says it’s crowded and dangerous, fire hazard, dirty and so on. I think they worry too much about the tourists’ safety. There are too many restrictions now, so frustrating…. So, I prefer the Chinatown of the past, it’s much easier to do business, rent is cheaper and no nonsense rules from government.
With the arrival of new land uses and users in the neighborhood, an immediate sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is created, forming a contested urban landscape (Chang 2000).

With their conserved facades, stylish restaurants and cutting-edge décor, the boutique hotels represent everything that long-time residents fear about the inevitable fate of their neighborhood. Avoiding the hotels has thus become a dominant ‘experience’ for them. While some opine that its restaurants are too expensive, others feel that the hotels cater only to the young and fashionable. A class divide is formed with the hotels playing a central role in the way people relate to the environment. When asked if he patronizes the boutique inns, this is how a former resident of Chinatown replied:

No, I don’t patronize these places. For me, I buy things at People’s Park Complex, cheap and good. I find it hard to relate to the hotels at Keong Saik Road. They are not part of my memories of old Chinatown. Of course, I prefer the old. These hotels don’t really bring life, they only attract the rich here. In the past, the shophouses around Royal Peacock hotel belonged to a relative of the Johor Sultan. After it was sold to a developer, it became a hotel. There is no link to the past. The hotel doesn’t fit my memories of Keong Saik.

Hotels in Chinatown, currently numbering over 15, has transformed a working class residential neighbourhood into a heritage tourism site. How others perceive this class dimension of change is worth exploring further.

The main reason for the non-experience of hotels is their perceived costs. Their glossy upmarket image is an immediate turn-off for many residents accustomed to the rough and tumble of old buildings and activities of the past. Although most residents acknowledged the ‘cleaning up’ of the environment as positive, concerns about the neighbourhood’s ‘affordability’ were also repeatedly voiced. A Chinatown resident of over 50 years opined that the spruced-up environment benefits ‘tourists and rich people’ more than ordinary folks like himself:
I don’t really think they bring to life to Chinatown. They improve the image of Chinatown, making the place cleaner and more presentable [but] I prefer the past more. Although there were dirty places, the Chinatown was vibrant, very crowded but enjoyable. [Interviewer: Will New Majestic hotel contribute to the neighbourhood?] No, it is just a nice building, beautify the surroundings only. This type of hotel attracts tourists and rich people. Do you see old people like us hanging out at these places? We hang out at coffee shops instead.

Pointing to the hotels along Keong Saik Road, another former resident reminisced how the shophouses were once occupied by grocery shops, a laundry outlet and eating houses popular with residents. The daily experiences of social encounters and patronage have now been replaced by the non-experience of the hotels.

The perception of cost is not unfounded. An online perusal of the hotel restaurants reveals that a standard ‘business set-lunch (two courses)’ costs in the region of S$30 (around US$21.20). Dinner menus are pegged at around S$50 or more. A typical ala carte main course is priced at S$20. When asked about eating at the restaurants, most interviewees adopted dark humor in their replies. While one described herself as a ‘normal worker unlike the tais tais (socialities) frequenting the hotel, another quipped he will only enjoy the hotels after striking the lottery:

I go to Keong Saik Road’s coffeeshops to eat, not the hotels…. Ultimately, the new shops and hotels are not meant for normal workers like me. They are not for people like me, so I never patronize them. The things they sell are expensive. (Worker at a medical hall in Chinatown for the past ten years)

Eat at those restaurants? Never, it is not cheap at all. OK, maybe if I strike 4D (Singapore lottery). Too expensive and is not worth it. (Manager of a Chinatown coffee house for over ten years and Chinatown resident of over 20 years)
While tourists and local professionals can move with ease between hotels and local coffee shops, the mobility of the working class is far more constrained. As an employee in a trading shop along Keong Saik Road noted, a ‘blue-collar worker’ like himself will never be welcome in ‘high-class places’.

Christerdotter (2005) argues that how a hotel presents itself aesthetically and symbolically is an assertion of power. Through its architecture, physical setting and culinary offerings, a hotel ‘informs the visitor which group of people it turns to and aligns with…. Who belongs to the hotel? To whom does the hotel belong? Who fits in and who has the right to be there?’ (Christerdotter 2005, p. 102). Many of Singapore’s boutique hotels are the outcome of historic restoration. Sleek marketing has also popularized them with a lifestyle community (de Klumbis 2003), inevitably casting them as places of style and exclusivity. As experiential landscapes, they appeal explicitly to those seeking unique cultural experiences. For the working class, however, the hotels present a starkly different encounter - one marked by loss, exclusion and non-experience. In Singapore’s Chinatown, longtime residents perceive boutique hotels as an intrusive presence in what were once familiar, resident-oriented environments. As harbingers of change, the hotels symbolize the differentiated experiences and senses of belonging that different people have towards a place. The hotel experienscape clearly underscores the contestations that occur when heritage and modernity, tourists and locals, and the old and new converge in a city.

**Conclusion**

This study has presented three different perspectives on Singapore’s boutique hotel phenomenon. The manifold experiences that people bring to bear on hotels include: (a) the worker/owner who stages the hotel experience but also undergoes a personal experience of their own in creating the environment; (b) the guest who consumes the hotel as an extension of his/her individuality, identity and personal aspiration; and (c) the neighbor/resident who lives or works within the vicinity of the hotel, and for whom the hotels represent a cultural experience that is not always positive nor welcome. The varied experiences remind us that in any form of planning, the impacts and consequences will be unevenly shared across different groups. Urban and tourism development in particular accentuates the unevenness across nationalities and social-economic class. In Singapore, the adaptive reuse of historic buildings as hotels
and the emergence of an experiential economy have brought these cleavages to the fore, stirring feelings of loss and dislocation among some. That urban change can bring about dissent is not new (Kong and Yeoh 1996). However, compounded with elements of income disparity, spatial access and tourist entitlement, urban contestation can take on a more sinister complexion. The study of experienscapes offers one way to identify these fissures, no matter how subtle, in Singapore. As a signifier of change, how different social groups align themselves to boutique hotels tell us much about their experiential investment in the city and the potential effects on them. In its push towards tourism capital status (Chang 2016), concerted effort must be undertaken to ensure both tourists and Singaporeans benefit from development, with particular attention focused on the local working class.

The study of experienscapes also bears implications for tourism theorization and research. Moving attention from the experience economy to experienscapes, this study celebrates the centrality of place/landscape in tourism. By broadening perspectives beyond economic considerations, the focus on social, cultural and personal factors calls attention to the qualitative and sometimes intangible dimensions of tourism. As we have seen, sense of place, landscape nostalgia and feelings of belonging are central to people’s experiences of hotels, neighborhoods and the city. While pleasure is sought through deep immersion in place, the truest human fear is rooted in its converse - a sense of dislocation and non-belonging. Even in an increasingly connected, mobile and virtual world, ‘geography’ remains central in tourism and community life. Experienscapes may range from iconic natural and historical landmarks to purposefully built amenities and quotidian environments (O’Dell and Billing 2005). More than just scale and history, tourism is also ultimately about places/spaces and people’s relationship with them. Meaningful tourism research will do well to fix its eyes firmly on ‘place’ and the multiple experiences people have with and within it.

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Notes

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1. Despite Pine and Gilmore’s (1998, 1999) pioneering work on the experience economy, it was Alvin Toffler (1970) who first hypothesized the centrality of experiences in a post-service world in his book *Future Shock*. Experience industries and ‘experience makers’, he postulated, cater to the ‘psychic gratification’ and ‘quality of life’ demands of customers particularly (Toffler, cited in Lorentzen and Hansen 2009, p. 819).

2. It should be noted that the New Majestic Hotel will be closed in June 2017 and converted into a members-only private club.

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