

THE KNOWLEDGE OF MODERN CULTURAL HERITAGE OF GREECE THROUGH THE HOSTING OF "XENIA" HOTELS

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Abstract

During the period from 1950 to 1965, the largest chain of public tourism infrastructure was created by the Technical Department of the "Greek National Tourism Organization"- "E.O.T.". "Xenia" hotels are internationally recognized as an expression of Greek Modern Architecture. The aim of the study is to explore possibilities and guidelines about their designation via an integrated network of high architectural value tourism infrastructure instead of being in complete abandonment, as the offer of "authentic environments" and the knowledge of cultural heritage of this place - through the living experience of mild but continuous tourism - projects a new identity, which is of high importance both for our tourism and our culture.

Conceptual approach of Tourism

The conceptual approaches and definitions of tourism vary depending on the specific context in which it is examined. The fact, however, that it has become one of the major growth drivers of the global economy and a highly competitive and lucrative business is unquestionably accepted by all scholars, institutions and generally those involved in this phenomenon. According to the World Tourism Organization "tourism" is defined as the activity of people traveling to stay in places outside their usual environment and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or other purposes not related to the paid work in the destination.¹

Transition from the standard of mass tourism to other alternative forms of tourism

Although tourism has been based from antiquity to the present day on leisure and travel, it has also presented a morphological development and an expanding territorial structure, while the migration from the standard of mass tourism to other more alternative forms of tourism was the most significant section throughout this procedure. The key factors that contributed to the development of these alternative forms of tourism were the handling of the problem of seasonality in combination

with the geographical redistribution of tourist traffic, and the heterogeneity of the motivations of tourists and, consequently, of the tourism demand. Main outcome of this reality is that, on the one hand, new tourist destinations are added on the touristic map of the world and, on the other hand, that the Experiential Tourism is strongly reinforced.

Focus on cultural tourism and correlation of it with cultural heritage

Among the milder forms of alternative tourism, cultural tourism owns a special place, as it is also integrated in the programs of UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the World Tourism Organization either as their main objective or as one of the most important instruments for sustainable development with minimal impact on the environment and local cultures. Cultural tourism spreads over a mosaic of monuments, places, traditions, art forms, celebrations and experiences, that portray a country and its people in all their diversity, while a characteristic observation is the fact that the worlds of culture and tourism approach the idea of cultural tourism from different perspectives in terms of objectives, the planning and management decisions.

Extensively, it is highly supported that a stronger identity is given to our tourism with culture. Culture is recognized as a development tool, which has much to offer on many levels, especially in the area of regional development and strengthening of tourism because, through diversification and enrichment of the tourist product and attenuation of the seasonality of tourism, it strengthens the competitiveness of the destination while it boosts the local economy. Meanwhile, a new development in the exploitation of cultural assets of our country is given with tourism, as the use of cultural goods also affects the real economy of the touristic areas.

Greek tourism

In Greece, the concept of hospitality has been existed since ancient times. However, it was not until the decade of the 1920's that external and internal tourism emerged as a coherent economic and social phenomenon. The first public office that had the responsibility of managing the development of the Greek tourist industry was the "Visitors and Reports Service", which was established in 1914². Since 1929, some initial state efforts in organizing the tourism industry was accomplished by the foundation of the "Greek National Tourism Organization" (E.O.T.). That effort had some good results having known acne before Second World War. Until 1950, the tourist infrastructure was limited and connected with commercial activity. The capacity of hotels was inadequate and amenities, construction and operation were at low levels. The first rules and regulations for the operation of hotels were

established by presidential decree in 27/1/1937, stating the appropriateness of a building based on its location, appearance, structure and facilities³.

After the Second World War, Greece entered a period of reconstruction and change. E.O.T. was re-established in 1950 and was the only public office, responsible for both the formulation and implementation of tourism industry policy, focusing on tourist facilities and public works. In our research we focus on the period from 1950 to 1965, when the largest chain of public tourism infrastructure was created by the Technical Department of the Agency (E.O.T.). These were mainly the "Xenia" hotels, which were built around the country.

"Xenia" hotels



Figure 1&2: "Xenia" Mykonos (left) & "Xenia" Poros (right)

"Xenia" hotels are internationally recognized as an expression of Greek Modern Architecture. Due to their architectural value, they played an important role in the development of the tourism industry in this country and therefore its economy. "Xenia" became a part of the modern architectural and cultural heritage of Greece and its history, depicting society at that time and contributing to the formation of an architectural landmark wherever constructed.

The construction of "Xenia" hotels began in 1950, under the supervision of Charalampos Sfaellos, as Director of Technical Service, until 1958⁴. Between 1957-1967, Aris Konstantinidis headed the Research Department, who transformed the service into a productive workshop based on team work and creative architectural design, including important architects of the era, such as G. Nikolettopoulos, I.Triantafyllidis, D. Zivas, D. Pikionis, F. Vokos, K. Stamatis, K. Krantonellis.

The forty-five (45) “Xenia” hotels were built in the most well-known and distinguished parts of the country, paying great attention to the choice of the site. The next important point was the adaptation of the building to the ground and the regional climatic conditions. Equally important was the connection of the interior and exterior space as a whole. They focused on a simple morphology, devoid of stylistic sophistication. The potential capacity of the units when built was small and ranged from 40-100 beds, with private spaces separated from areas open to the public.

During construction, the cost needed to be kept low. The immediate effect was standardization, based on an almost universal application of a construction grid, (4x4m. or 4x6m.), on which all spaces were included. A key element in construction was the use of materials with maximum constructional and morphological consistency, materials that every place could provide and were suitable for each landscape⁵. Last but not least, was the colour. Colours found in the natural landscape of the surrounding environment were used in the architectural project.

So, design included not only the issue of landscape integration, but also constructional and joinery details and even in the design of decorative materials such as furniture and fixtures.

The current situation of E.O.T. “Xenia”



Figure 3&4: “Xenia” Andros, 1960 (left) & 2008 (right)

In the last 60 years, since the implementation of the programme, “Xenia” hotels have met not only periods of prosperity but also current abandonment. They served as social nuclei around which the local high society’s life was developed, were popular resorts for public figures of that time, and were meeting places between the local community and foreign tourists. Aris Konstantinidis’ contribution in Greek tourist facilities was interrupted abruptly by the dictatorship of 1967 and E.O.T. stopped planning and designing architectural studies for hotels. The state’s decision to promote mass tourism and the design of multi-storey hotels, heralded the gradual

depreciation of "Xenia" hotels. From the '80s until now, their management was either transferred through leasing, by E.O.T. to private entrepreneurs, or they remained under the operation of E.O.T. until becoming a loss, and so they were abandoned.

More specifically, "Xenia" hotels of Ioannina, Irakleio and Chania were demolished. Some reopened after restoration and modernization, not necessarily without changing their architectural quality, such as in Poros, Mykonos and Volos. In other cases they changed use but the most are in complete abandonment, although they have been recognized as New Monuments of Cultural Heritage by the Ministry of Culture. Such examples are "Xenia" in Andros, Paliouri, Skiathos or Kalambaka.

This situation has caused reactions from the Greek and foreign architectural community for a long time, without any effective and comprehensive outcome. The Architects Association has submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Culture in 2003, for the immediate protection and enhancement of the "Xenia" hotels, which were built during the period of 1950-1967, requesting their classification as preservable buildings, along with their surrounding areas, so that these units, after maintaining the original plans and organized appropriately, could form an integrated network of high architectural value tourism infrastructure⁶. The unpretentious and simple structure and construction of "Xenia" hotels refers to a different ethos and quality in the way of accommodation, as a result of a unified architectural reflection.

"Xenia" in the current political and economic context of Greece

The transition towards the new standard of housing and business development is reflected on many policies and legislation of the last four years. The most significant and representative ones of this new model concern the establishment of the Fund for the Development of the Private Asset (HRADF) and the establishment of special planning and licensing process for the maturation and development of public estate (N.3986/2011).

Regarding the case study, and within the framework of the existence of about 80,000 public buildings in the real estate portfolios of HRADF, 17 hotels "Xenia" have already been included with the intention to be evaluated and selected for exploitation based on criteria and commercial factors. (Xenia Andros, Xenia Tsagarada, Xenia Vitina, Xenia Heraklion, Xenia Arachova, Xenia Drama, Xenia Portaria, Xenia Komotini, Xenia Serres, Xenia Kythnos, Xenia Kastoria, Xenia Thasos, Xenia Kozani, Xenia Edessa, Xenia Xanthi, Xenia Platamonas, Xenia Nafplion)

In parallel, some buildings have already been selected among the existing portfolio with two specific utilization proposals. As far as the first proposal is concerned, it includes buildings of particular historical and cultural value, which are placed on some of the most privileged landscapes of the country (sanatoriums, Mansions, Hotels Xenia). For this proposal an international tender process has been decided to be conducted for the nomination of the highest bidder, in order to exploit these buildings individually or in aggregate in the form of hotel unit taking into account the existing land uses and building restrictions. Regarding the second proposal, the invitation for offer submission included the Andros Xenia, Xenia Skiathos and Xenia Tsagarada, but interest for investment presented only for Xenia Skiathos. This study, for which Strategic Environmental Assessment and the proper urban plan have already been completed, concerns the upgrading of the existing building into a small capacity - with high standards- hotel and the co-development of a limited number of holiday homes in the surroundings.

Conclusion - Questioning

The recognition of the importance of safeguarding and enhancing our cultural heritage is of particular importance at a time of radical changes and urges us to preserve and strengthen those elements that can contribute to continuity and renewal of our civilization, as it is accepted that they are inextricably linked to our individual and collective identity. As a country with a rich cultural history and world-class cultural identity, it is obvious that the regard of these assets and their utilization in accordance with the legislative, building and environmental statutory limitations are of high importance, as the designation of quality, authenticity and distinctive identity of "Xenia" is a key factor for our culture and our tourism.

In the context of current data, the need to exit from this crisis, which is not only economic but also social and cultural, urges us to rise to the occasion and invest in an effort of organizing our cultural experiential tourism, while the designation and the reoccupation of the hotels "Xenia" can be a key pillar in this effort. The projection of our country mainly as a "Sun-Sea-Classical Antiquities" destination does not absolutely tally with the range of the cultural history of Greece. The utilization of the buildings of "Xenia" is estimated to have a positive impact on the country not only through the creation of new jobs and the attraction of investments and funding for sustainable development, but also through the preservation and promotion of our cultural heritage and their contribution to the promotion of our country at an international level through the strengthening of our cultural identity.

Agreeing and supporting the foresaid proposal of the Architects Association, we strengthen it putting further proposals towards achieving and implementing such an

objective. Firstly, the characterization of the most remarkable "Xenia" as preservable along with their surrounding areas is suggested in order to maintain these units according to the original plans and to suitably arrange them to form a touristic network of high architectural value infrastructure. The proposed "Xenia" network can be combined in the long run with other networks based on the axis of ancient theaters, archaeological sites, museums, galleries and generally throughout modern culture and cultural routes. These networks can be intended for a wide range of visitors, who will be able to actively contribute to access, participation and enjoyment of the cultural product within respect for cultural diversity and experiential cultural tourism.

As several of "Xenia" have been in condition of complete abandonment for a long time, interdisciplinary collaboration is required (architects, civil engineers, mechanical engineers, archaeologists etc) for their rehabilitation. This is of even higher importance in the cases of those buildings that are classified as preservable monuments, in order to address any problems related to their licensing, reoperation and ensuring their safe operation. Given the fact, that the worlds of culture and tourism approach the idea of cultural tourism from different perspectives, the strengthening of the cooperation between the two sides and an adequate horizontal coordination among the responsible official bodies, the local actors and the private initiative are considered very important in order to achieve the desired results. Moreover, awareness among citizens about issues concerning architectural heritage and a cultural education in our country are important to be developed, so as to understand that those are issues that concern us all, and that they do not only constitute the subject of some specialists.

Finally, it is important to be mentioned that, based on the assumption that the development of alternative forms of tourism contributes to changing the pattern of tourism structure in Greece, the question arises about whether the proposed network of "Xenia" hotels could be effective in such way.

In today's reality, when the private sector has a basic role in the process of formulating and implementing policies and strategic options for the development of cultural tourism, concerns are raised for both new design tools and the consequent effects. Even when investment initiatives are under the jurisdiction of the private sector, the government has many responsibilities on the planning of both interventions and actions that ensure that goals are effective not only for companies but also for society and environment. This meaningful collaboration among stakeholders should be sought in practical terms to attain the best possible result.

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