The historic hotel as ‘quasi-freedom machine’: negotiating utopian visions and dark histories at Amsterdam's Lloyd Hotel and ‘Cultural Embassy’

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The historic hotel as ‘quasi-freedom machine’: negotiating utopian visions and dark histories at Amsterdam’s Lloyd Hotel and ‘Cultural Embassy’

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Existing research on historic hotels has identified their role as key projections of community ideals and place identities, as ‘hip’/creative business ventures and as dark tourism sites of ‘darkness’, difficulties and dissonances. However, there has been less discussion on what happens when these intentions and operations come together in a single historic hotel. Specifically, we argue that the historical Lloyd Hotel in Amsterdam was recently adapted to function as a ‘quasi-freedom machine’ for cultural and heritage guests and visitors – a building to be unchained materially from its carceral pasts via extensive conservation and to become a liberating space for cultural, heritage and hospitality users. Drawing on the narratives proposed by the architects and managers adapting the building and the accounts of its former (juvenile detention centre worker) and current users (hotel guests and cultural tourists), this paper examines the convergences and divergences related to the creation of such a single ‘utopian’ space, also in relation to its painful past and cultural touristic present. In doing so, the article intends to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between utopian (liberating) visions of and user practices in historic hotels marked by difficult histories.

Keywords: historic hotels; adaptive reuse; dark tourism; cultural space; tourist performance; critical heritage studies

Introduction

I do not think that there is anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice. So there may, in fact, always be a certain number of projects whose aim is to modify some constraints, to loosen, or even to break them, but none of these projects can, simply by its nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically, that will be established by the project itself. (Foucault, 1994a, p. 354)

It has become a strange place for me now . . . in the past it was key in, key out, again key in key out, and now, you can just walk in and you can look all the way to the roof. (Mars, former juvenile detention worker, 19 September 2013)

This article analyses the historic hotel as a key site for the examination of the interplay between adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, and their related interpretations of the past
and present use and tourist practice. Principles of heritage conservation often invoke notions of public access, community participation and economic viability in the conservation of historic buildings and sites (Evans, 2002; Hall & McArthur, 1998). Conservation of historic buildings can also vary in terms of the extent of adaptive interventions (Bullen, 2007; Hall & McArthur, 1998), ranging from stabilisation of the building to grand reshapings of its utility, function and meaning, including what is termed ‘adaptive reuse’ (Bullen, 2007; Bullen & Love, 2010; Yung & Chan, 2012). In the case of many historic hotels and heritage accommodations, their new and current spaces of hospitality are often examples of radical and somehow imaginative adaptive reuse. For instance, many historic theatres, warehouses and prisons have in recent years been converted into hotels. The adaptation of old buildings as boutique, historic and heritage hotels has been the subject of extensive inquiry in the field of tourism studies of late (Chang, 1997; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Peleggi, 2005; Rogerson, 2010). For some scholars, this process mainly concerns the issue of sustainable marketing of these sites as cultural resources and ‘hip’ establishments (Chhabra, 2010; Henderson, 2011). For others, such as Chang and Teo (2009), McIntosh and Siggs (2005) and McNeill (2008), boutique, historic and heritage hotels represent key settings for the understanding of broader experiential, cultural, social and economic contemporary processes. In these cases, some heritage experts have critiqued the denial or the limitation of public access to such adapted sites, considered as public spaces loaded with meaning for the broader community (Darcy & Wearing, 2009; Yıldırım & Turan, 2012).

In this article, we reflect on the recent adaptive reuse of the Lloyd Hotel in Amsterdam, seeking to build on such preceding efforts at understanding social and cultural processes in and through heritage, boutique and historic hotel spatialities. We do this by focusing in particular on questions of ‘freedom’, public access and adaptive reuse of this historic building. The Lloyd Hotel is an intriguing case to study, since it originated as a transhipment hotel for financially strapped Eastern European migrants, and is now converted into a cosmopolitan hotel and cultural space largely attracting, for its sophistication, a privileged class of transnational travellers (Figure 1). It has also functioned as an improvised refugee camp and a prison

Figure 1. Amsterdam’s Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy.
Source: Authors.
and juvenile detention facility in the 1930s and the period between 1941 and 1989, respectively (Ong, Minca, & Felder, 2014). Yet, this adapted historic hotel differs from many existing heritage accommodations for offering an array of rooms with differential pricing or what the hotel management brands its range of ‘one-to-five-star rooms’ (www.lloydhotel.nl). In addition, to create freely accessible cultural space for the broader public in its purported role of a ‘cultural embassy’ (www.lloydhotel.nl), the lobby, the restaurant and the library are fully accessible to visitors at no costs. The conference rooms often host free exhibitions and public lectures. The first aim of this paper is hence a critical examination of the discourses and practices related to such a public cultural space vision(ing) and creation: what we provocatively describe as the production of a ‘quasi-freedom machine’. In so doing, we seek to contribute to existing debates on adaptive reuse and public access of heritage sites.

The second aim is to contribute to the burgeoning dark tourism literature by considering how key past and present users deal with buildings marked by ‘pain and shame’ (Logan & Reeves, 2008). Specifically, we focus on the ways in which prison and carceral-related material and architecture were removed at the Lloyd Hotel and the ways in which such physical erasure were not only justified, but also contested. As it will be argued in the paper, the negotiation of dark histories is a paramount task of heritage tourism planners and managers for such sites. Among the most demanded types of tourist accommodation (Timothy & Teye, 2009, p. 247), historic hotels are in fact often sites of contested management and appropriation of the past, resulting in conservation dilemmas (Henderson, 2001, 2007) and ‘heritage dissonances’ (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), especially when adapted from buildings marked by difficult or violent histories (Hartmann, 2014). As the Lloyd Hotel has also been used as a refugee camp, interrogation centre and prison, this article also connects with research on undesirable heritage in tourism (Logan & Reeves, 2008; MacDonald, 2006; Ryan, 2007) and thana- or dark tourism (Dann & Seaton, 2001; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). According to MacDonald (2006, p. 9), ‘undesirable heritage’, or ‘heritage that a majority of the people would prefer not to have’, challenges heritage managers and tourism marketers to ponder over the extent to which the visitors and the broader public should be educated about unwelcome but significant events of the past. Very often, this results in the presentation of the more unproblematic side of these sites histories for tourist consumption.

Lennon and Foley (2000), however, have uncovered a segment of tourists motivated instead by disasters and death (Adams, 2006). Rather than being put off by sites of past sufferings and turmoil, these ‘dark tourists’ tend to see them as attractions (Gillen, 2012). Ryan (2007, p. 94), for instance, argues that war memorials and war heritage sites are important not only for the events they are remembered for, but also for those that are deliberately forgotten, that is, for their silencing effects on the production of selective memories of the past. While such conflicting tensions in touring and viewing displays of dark histories or difficult heritage have become a focus of much dark tourism analysis (Stone, 2006; Strange & Kempa, 2003), we seek to build on these to analyse and discuss the material erasure of painful pasts by the project’s chief initiators and their reinterpretations and tour guiding performances by a former prison staff. We also draw on post-visit narratives from hotel guests and cultural tourists to understand the ways in which they make sense of and interpret their experiences in this ‘dark’ historic hotel. In doing so, we also seek to contribute to a nascent strand of work in critical heritage studies (Waterton & Watson, 2013; Winter, 2013) and more in general research that examines present ‘cultural’ engagements with painful or ‘shameful’ pasts (Logan & Reeves, 2008; Winter, 2004).

Theoretically, we focus on a ‘governmental’ examination of the hotel and cultural hub as a space where cultural authorities seek to shape visions, conduct and practices of its
visitors (Bunnell, 2004) and contribute to work on control and regulation within hotel spaces (McNeill, 2008; Wood, 1994). This is done via an analysis of power rationalities largely inspired by a Foucauldian approach (Foucault, 1994b), and in particular of the ways in which these rationalities operate in the construction of the spatialities of the Lloyd Hotel as a heritage accommodation and cultural hub, and are consumed, negotiated and/or resisted. In particular, we examine how discourses and ideals shape the adaptive reuse of the historic building and site in question and how these visions were variously negotiated or resisted by their past and present users. In doing so, we hope to contribute to understandings of the fragmented and somehow conflicting experiences that tourists and managers have of these heritage sites and of the negotiated and contested nature of the commodification of history in tourism more in general (Chang, Milne, Fallon, & Corrime, 1996; Dann & Seaton, 2001; Minca & Borghi, 2009; Minca & Wagner, 2014).

Methodologically, we draw on intensive and detailed ethnographic work in ‘the field’, which in this case is the Lloyd Hotel itself. Tourism fieldwork as a research methodology has been described as an inherently multi-tooled apparatus and an ‘art of the possible’ (Salazar, 2010, p. xix) where researchers seek out numerous grounded and situated ways of understanding the phenomenon and place investigated. The fieldwork was focused on uncovering the dominant discourses shaping the production and creation of the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy and their spatialities, and the ways in which various groups of people experience and negotiate this space. Data collected were subjected to a critical discourse analysis of a qualitative nature, with emphasis on uncovering the linkages between key themes of this research including history of the hotel, its role as a cultural embassy, visitor practices and experiences, workings of power, utopian visions (multi-pricing), accessibility and governmentality.

Specifically, to collect the discourses produced by various social actors concerned, we draw on interviews with the architects and managers behind the adaptive reuse of Lloyd Hotel as a boutique hotel and a cultural venue, with a former employee of the building’s juvenile detention centre past and with hotel guests. Furthermore, one of us conducted auto-ethnography as a hotel guest in a one-star room and two of us as guides for a group of visiting Japanese students staying in the hotel. In addition to abundant (auto)-ethnographic notes, students were asked to scribble, write and draw on blank pieces of paper what they felt about the various spaces of the Hotel they experienced as guests.

To understand the social interactions at the site so we could better contextualise the discourses and narratives collected, we also arranged six ‘field observations’ at the hotel’s public spaces between January 2012 and October 2013. In order to cross-check our own on-site observations of ‘visitor experiences’ and to obtain unobtrusive information on visitor experiences, we also collected comments from the guest book (with permission and unidentified), and one year of publicly available postings (2013) on TripAdvisor, the popular and somewhat authoritative travel website where customers’ opinions are exposed to a large global audience. For historical contextualisation, we tapped into archival materials from the meeting notes of the historical shipping company and of prison management meetings.

Overall, the use of this selection of methods was geared towards understanding the phenomenon at various key vantage points and providing opportunities to interpretively cross-check or ‘crystallise’ findings across methodological barriers (Ellingson, 2009; Salazar, 2010). The thematic analysis of the collected data follows the conceptual and empirical categories within each data collection strategy and across the different methods. As such, we have self-consciously attempted to pursue a partial but situated and embedded approach to tourism research. Building on a nascent corpus of interpretive
Building a ‘quasi-freedom machine’: utopian visions, rationalities and the Lloyd Hotel as accessible historic hotel and ‘cultural embassy’

In this section, we discuss how the realisation of a cultural ‘embassy’ in the Lloyd Hotel was conceived as an act of quasi-utopian visioning geared at liberating the building materially from its carceral pasts and creating a free and accessible art and cultural space in the gentrified Eastern Docklands of Amsterdam. With a focus on the rationalities shaping the adaptive reuse of the building as historic hotel and cultural hub, we reflect on how the establishment of a pricing system ranging from cheaper ‘one-star’ with shared bathrooms to the more expensive celebrity ‘five-star’ was also in relation to such a cultural tourism discourse, and in particular to the emphasis placed on the question of material and intellectual accessibility of this heritage institution. This vision was influenced by the biography of one of the creators and we will thus show how this very fact has brought about the selective downplaying of the site’s dark histories, in the sense that most of the architectural and material markers of the building’s carceral past uses were intentionally removed – hence an explicit and intended privileging of the site as a cultural attraction over a dark tourism one.

The vision of the designers and managers of the new Lloyd Hotel, Otto Nan, Suzanne Oxenaar, Liesbeth Mijnlief and Gerrit Groen, can be summarised as follows:

The Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy is the first one to five star design hotel in the world. It was created out of a curiosity to explore the cultural luggage of guests, a longing to make a connection between Dutch culture and theirs and a zest for making guests feel welcome... Building and interior communicate Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy’s attitude: it is a work in progress, never to be finished. Catering to all kinds of people, the atmosphere is relaxed. The hotel and its restaurant and bar are open to hotel guests and locals. The Cultural Embassy presents a continual program of events around its cultural guests and the festivals in Amsterdam. Events take place throughout the building and can mostly be visited free of charge. They are a mix of high and low art, design, catwalk appearances, performances, collections, textiles, jewellery, and food events (www.lloydhotel.nl emphasis added)

According to the designers, the concept for the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy was inspired by what they term as the rise of ‘cultural internationalisation’ in the Netherlands in the late 1990s, since they realised that most existing hotels had not tapped into the cultural potential of their often international visitors and they wanted to plug into the energy of such niche forms of cultural tourism. Lloyd Hotel’s Artistic Director Suzanne Oxenaar further clarifies:

So, in an easy way, we make connections, and because we are not just a hotel, we are more part of the whole cultural field here, a sort of natural location for this kind of exchange, and that is also where our idea to be a one-to-five-stars hotel came from. [...] One star is shared toilet and a five stars room is something really unique in the hotel world; really something else. (Oxenaar, 16 March 2012)

What was envisioned in this plan was an accessible and unique cultural hub. Obvious economic considerations required the guests to be charged for the rooms, but the team behind the
project attempted to circumvent the possibilities of financial issues keeping potential guests out precisely by envisaging a multi-tiered room pricing system (the one-to-five-stars philosophy/approach). According to Oxenaar, particular emphasis was placed on accommodating a broad target group characterised by a varied cultural background and income. The rooms, the restaurant and the bar needed to be good but not necessarily expensive. It was also envisioned that one central space should exist where guests of all kinds would be welcomed, meet each other and share their respective cultural background and experience. The place also showcased art exhibitions of various genres, some located in rather unusual spaces (Figure 2), and was conceived as a meeting place for local residents and visiting artists.

Such a vision of broad public access to culture and the fine arts is arguably consistent with existing cultural heritage and tourism mainstream discourses, which also stress the same sets of ideals as identified by the critical strand of heritage studies (Di Giovine, 2009; Winter, 2007). For instance, the first ‘principle’ listed in the authoritative ICOMOS ENAME Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites (http://www.enamecharter.org/principles_1.html) suggests that ‘interpretation and presentation activities should also be physically accessible to the public, in all its variety’ and that ‘every effort should be made to communicate the site’s values and significance to its varied audiences’. With backgrounds in art history (Otton Nan), curatorship (Suzanne Oxenaar) and high-end hospitality (Liesbeth Mijnlief), the key figures who initiated and led the adaptive reuse of the building into a historic hotel and cultural venue (or ‘embassy’) are arguably cultural authorities producing and circulating cultural tourism discourses championing public access.

Figure 2. Installation art at the hotel’s mezzanine floor.
Source: Authors.
The free-access and well-stocked library is also a testament to the creators’ utopian visions. Located on the fourth mezzanine level just above the restaurant, the library began its operation with 1721 donated art monographs from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in 2004. Aimed at both visitor and student readership from the local community, the library has tripled in dimension resulting from sustained donations of texts from private and institutional collections. In line with its art and cultural embassy vision, the furniture of the library was also specially crafted. For instance, artist Suchan Kinochita designed the unique bookcases which can easily be stacked or moved in various orders if required, while graphic designer Viktor Wiertz painted wooden slates for the alphabetical ordering of the books. Reading sessions, exhibitions and lectures based on the collection had also been organised.

However, such vision and the related exercise of authority – something inherently concerning each and every dominant narrative of the past – in silencing other narratives, as Foucault (1994b) would have it, are not totalising in their intentions and effects. They are in fact variously consumed, negotiated and/or resisted in both intended and unintended ways. For instance, the one-to-five-stars room philosophy baffled the hotel and hospitality experts at Michelin:

Also what is 1 and what is 5 stars? So with Michelin, you know Michelin, they came here and they were really such a pissed people... ‘Ohh one-to-five-stars, how do you think we are going to put that in a book, and how you want to pop-up every time when people say 2 stars you come, 5 stars Lloyd hotel... etc' and I had never thought about that because... So finally I said, well why don’t you put that hotel upside down and forget it... but that is also something we thought about... before we opened we thought should we call it a hotel or something else. Are we a hotel or something entirely new? (Oxenaar, 16 March 2012)

The Michelin experts, according to Ms Oxenaar, with their accusation of seeking visibility by appealing to every price-category, entirely failed to appreciate the utopian intentions of her team. The creator’s vision in fact went deliberately against prevailing international hospitality and gastronomical business principles and ideals (single star/class ratings at the expense of exclusion of certain segments of guests), but might not have been entirely new in drawing from cultural tourism principles on accessibility endorsed by international agencies such as International Council on Monuments and Sites and UNESCO. However, the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy may be seen as pioneering in terms of seeking to realise these lofty ideals.

What had initially been and still remains clear in the designers’ vision is their attempt to create a cultural utopian hub of sort, and certainly not a dark tourism attraction. While the painful past is actually variously presented through heritage interpretation, art exhibitions and guided tours, the managers’ strategic choice to downplay the building’s dark tourism potential is evidenced by the large-scale removal of carceral-associated material elements. This was arguably influenced by the personal biography of the key initiator of the renovated Lloyd, Suzanne Oxenaar:

I always have a connection with prisons because when I was a student I was travelling between Amsterdam and Utrecht every day. At that time they were building the first women’s prison. I know the place well because as children, we were supposed to visit the prison from time to time to give the prisoners something out of good will and to make a nice gesture. As such, I have always been very aware of prisons. I was completely shocked that people would be like in a flat building on top of each other, I felt this to be completely inhuman. (Oxenaar, 16 March 2012)

Oxenaar followed through with that childhood experience by doing theatres for prison inmates in various parts of the Netherlands. Having witnessed the ‘heavy’ and ‘inhumane’
conditions of incarceration, the creators’ move to eradicate the material remains of the building during its adaptive reuse was intentional and deliberated:

This place was made a hotel initially. If this place is built as a prison initially, I honestly will not have wanted to make a hotel from it. The period of the prison is very heavy... When we first got here, there were bars all over... for many years I have this dream... that I put strings to all the bars and during the opening we will let them all fall and let light in. (Oxenaar, 16 March 2012; italics added)

Hence, the creators instructed the architects to restore the building in ways that would recognise that the enduring reference point for its conservation and adaptation was the time in which it functioned as a hotel. Emphasis was therefore placed on the preservation of the façade and the corridors of the building, which better reflected the site’s migrant and transhipment past. This meant all the prison doors, cells and bars were to be removed. Although a permanent gallery of historic photographs and a mini-museum were created in one of the stairways, where the full range of past histories were indeed conveyed (Figures 3 and 4), much of the physical alterations and works done to conserve the building were geared towards presenting the place mainly as a hospitable space with a migrant transhipment hotel past.

Unlike the case of some other prison-turned-into-hotels, Oxenaar’s team had opted to move away from the building’s carceral past in the restoration of the building. Whilst the refugee camp and prison memories have indeed become part of the general heritage

Figure 3. A mini-museum narrating the Lloyd Hotel’s histories as transhipment hotel, refugee camp, adult prison and juvenile detention centre and Yugoslavian art studios. Source: Authors.
interpretation that the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy provides of the building – for instance through the display of newspaper articles and photos, a popular history book, their website and guided tours – the material and tangible aspects of such difficult past were largely removed. Such (material) silencing has, however, complicated the process of reconciliation with those painful memories. Former inmates and detainees, when they visited the place in its current incarnation, have conveyed to Oxenaar and her colleagues that they would have liked to see objects and stories referring also to their painful experience of the past use of the building (Interview with Oxenaar, 16 March 2012). Their main argument was that the presence of strong signifiers and reminders of human suffering, despite the uncomfortable feelings they may provoke to the visitor, could potentially better communicate, keep alive and possibly help reconcile the most difficult legacies incorporated by this unique building. The original plan of creating a cultural utopia, hospitable and accessible, while having an intrinsic social purpose, had at the same time led to the physical erasure of these alternative, but equally significant, memories.

In this section, we have argued that such a vision at creating a public space for culture and the arts and of a more inclusive form of cultural tourism resulted in the establishment of the Lloyd Hotel as a multi-priced historic hotel and cultural hub and discussed the ways in which utopian visions of liberating the building from its past as a disciplinary institution and the personal biography of the main initiator of its adaptive reuse had a crucial influence in shaping the principles guiding its conversion into a heritage site of cosmopolitan hospitality. In the next section, we consider the implications of these influences on the contemporary narratives and related practices amongst the users of the building.
Dealing with dark past and cultural utopian present: narratives and practices of past and present users

Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition. This is not to say that the exercise of freedom is completely indifferent to spatial distribution, but it can only function when there is a certain convergence; in the case of divergence or distortion, it immediately becomes the opposite of that which had been intended. The panoptic qualities of Guise could perfectly well have allowed it to be used as a prison. Nothing could be simpler. (Foucault, 1994a, p. 356)

Oxenaar and the creators’ declared vision of unchaining the Lloyd Hotel from its carceral pasts and making it a freely accessible cultural hub and hospitality space have somehow met with the convergences, divergences and distortions Foucault identified in the aforementioned quote. In this section, drawing on (auto)-ethnographic observations, interviews with a key former juvenile detention worker and hotel guests and analysis of visitor and guest narratives found in the guestbook and a key online source, we thus discuss the narratives of past and present users of the site, paying particular attention to the convergences, divergences and distortions of these narratives and practices compared to those of the creators. These observations and narratives indeed help to shed light on the ways in which users from former workers to hotel guests variously engaged with discourses, visions and practices of the management and how accordingly, and viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, questions of power may be negotiated among the different approaches to the building observed.

The micro-powers which worked to convert a carceral space into a hospitable one, for example, created emotional tensions for one user in particular: Ton Mars who worked in Lloyd Hotel between 1976 and 1989 as a crafts-instructor and youth-coach during the time it was a juvenile detention centre (Figure 5). When interviewed, Mars oscillated between a nostalgic longing for the past and a painful recognition of the violence then perpetuated among those walls. However, what matters for our main argument is that Mars’ narratives and practices in the building post-adaptive reuse have largely diverted from the creators’ vision. Arguably, rather than appearing as liberated, he seemed to be locked in the past. In conversation with the authors, Mars in fact recounted incidents of discipline and punishment which had deeply disturbed him, and yet when asked to sum up the changes that had happened in the Eastern Docklands and the adaptive reuse of the former prison and detention centre, he stated that:

In the past you sensed the building more than now. Now it is just a little building in the middle of higher department buildings ... When the building was closed and I drove away I looked at it in my rear-view mirror, I had to cry and I said to myself, I hope that something beautiful will become of you ... and it has become beautiful but I have lost some of my connection with it. You can now just walk in. In the past it was key in key out, again key in key out. And now you can look all the way up in the central hall. (Mars, 19 September 2013)

The irony here is that the liberation of the building’s spaces has brought about the loss of Ton Mars’ personal connections with it. Intriguingly, Ton Mars’ personal carceral-related narrative, in most parts, runs counter to the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy’s approach to adaptively reusing the building. Explaining the reconstruction of the space where his workshop used to stand:

They constructed floors at exactly the same level as these fences used to be, so now you have rooms below and up ... the hall has furthermore been cut into six parts. They constructed a
hanging floor in it and made three extra entrances. My working hall thus changed into six hotel rooms... Nowadays I can no longer orientate myself in the building. I have to think, where am I? (Mars, 19 September 2013)

Mars’ sense of loss is also tied to the removal of materials related to the juvenile detention period. Today, Mr Mars occasionally guides visitors at the hotel on an informal basis and often embodies and communicates the tension between the carceral histories of the place and its current function described to us. For instance, he likes to tell visitors that ‘at the place where I had a lot of heated discussions with my director, there now stands a canopy bed’.

At the same time, the responses of the guests to the dark histories of the hotel tended to oscillate between a keen interest and a sense of unease – both somehow converging and diverging from the creators’ dream of making the building a cultural ‘freedom machine’. For example, in our interviews, we realised that while the prison past appeared to be an appealing factor for some: ‘we like the place for the migrant and prison histories’ (Interview, Sergio, 25 September 2013), others found the material and discursive reminders of the carceral moment ‘creepy’ and ‘unnerving’: ‘It feels like a prison, especially the halls and the shared bathrooms’ (Interview with hotel guest, Mike, 3 October 2013). Such fear of and discomfort in relation to the carceral feelings experienced in the building were also observed in the TripAdvisor postings. For example, Tiffany was shocked to discover they would be ‘in the same room that probably was a prison during the Second World War’:

The room was creepy and the hallways were like I was staying at a prison camp. (Tiffany, 12 September 2013)
Furthermore, the historic component and the ‘funky’ and ‘quirky’ design and décor were often articulated in tandem. For instance, the combination of innovative design features (such as the ‘open’ showers to mention one) and history attracts lots of different guests, each with their own motivations:

I like the history. An emigrant hotel on the edge of Europe. The last stop for emigrants before embarking for the New World. I like the concept. A design hotel that caters for all classes of travellers under one roof. From dormitory-type rooms with shared bathrooms to five stars style. I’ve tried several different rooms and each is strangely appealing. Long and narrow with interesting space management solutions. Always with that uniquely Dutch, funky design angle. (Mikael, 16 October 2013)

Really enjoyed my three nights at the Lloyd Hotel. The hotel has a fascinating history and that history is reflected throughout the building. It’s a unique place in that there are rooms at every star level. While I stayed in a very good 3 stars room, the 4 and 5 stars rooms are really lovely (got to peek at a few of them). However, there is definitely a variety in the quality of the room at the same star level (my room has nicer than my colleague’s.) (Sha, 03/09/2013)

Guests such as Mikael and Sha were both aware of the history of the place and also appreciative of the unusual design of the rooms. For Mikael, it was the ‘emigrant hotel on the edge of Europe’ that appealed to him historically. For Sha, it was how history is embedded in the place, throughout the building. Both of them were keenly aware of the unique interior design of the rooms and how that is associated to the idiosyncratic star-rating system. For such guests, an experience in the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy was often more than just a mere hotel stay – it was also about exploring history and ‘discovering’ its marks. As Oxenaar (16 March 2012) noted: ‘they come here to discover new places’. Some of them come all the way from South America, at times trying to trace their ancestors’ roots, others for the uniquely designed rooms or, more simply, just because it is in a convenient location in Amsterdam or they see the hotel as an excellent meeting place. The Lloyd Hotel therefore seems to cater to a lot of different experiences, ranging from a utilitarian use of artistic design – ‘awesome, we just had sex in an eight persons bed’ (visitor book, 2013) – to the experiencing of haunted places and even ghost sightings (Interview, Oxenaar, 16 September 2012). Hence, visitors and guests have variously oscillated between converging towards the creators’ vision of the adapted hotel as a liberating cultural hub and away from that by returning to its painful pasts or by making sense of the place in merely leisurely ways.

Such divergence was also made evident by our ethnographic observations of a group of Japanese university students, who stayed at the hotel during their week-long exchange visit with our university and with whom we had long and intensive interviews in situ. Consequently, we found out that they consumed and responded to the hotel in intriguing ways. In the reflective scribbling they were asked to do, most of them described the hotel as ‘dark’, ‘gloomy’ and ‘scary/horror’. During the guided tour, some of them even engaged in a game of spoofing and filming their own version of the popular horror series Parasnormal Activity. Interestingly, according to Oxenaar (3 March 2013), this attitude was not entirely new, since there exist reports from guests about haunting and sightings of the paranormal kind.

While the innovative multi-tiered pricing allows for guests with different financial ‘muscles’ and budgets to stay in and mingle in the same spaces, it may, as our auto-ethnographic work has somehow surprisingly revealed, lead to feelings of unease as lower-star ‘people’ interact with the higher-star ones.
At the breakfast table the following day, Kate and I shared our experiences. She commented on how innovatively her three-star room was designed and went on to describe how she was fascinated with the ways in which the toilet was hidden and how the open shower was a real surprise. She had doubts whether the shower could actually work without turning the room into a flood plain, but was intrigued at how well it did work. Perhaps out of envy or jealousy, I tried to dampen her spirits by saying how such an open concept is likely to increase humidity levels within the room and by proxy the levels of moisture within the historic building and suggested that this may not be the best conservation practice. We were joined by a British couple who told us how nice their three stars room was – especially the opportunity to not only have breakfast in bed but also breakfast in the bath-tub located in the middle of the room. I was reluctant to share my experience in my gloomy one-star room but I did tell them about how my room may be the most authentic as the more minimalistic conservation works had retained the original white-green tiles. (Autoethnographic notes, 3 November 2013)

Such an encounter is in fact unlikely to happen in conventional hotel and accommodation settings that commonly have a narrower economic profile within the same facility (i.e. single star/price rating). The situation was possibly exacerbated by the vast differences between the Lloyd Hotel’s room décor and facilities – mezzanine floors, grand piano, spectacular shower rooms in the five-stars rooms and table lamps as room illumination, tiny cathode-ray tube television and shared shower rooms in the one-star rooms. Such a spatial arrangement of bringing budget guests and pop-stars under one roof potentially lays the foundations for unintentionally exposing and aggravating the emotional and individualised aspects of social stratification, or what Sennett and Cobb (1972) call ‘the hidden injuries of class’. Hence, the ‘liberating cultural machine’ the creators envisioned and operated appeared to function better for guests of the higher economic classes.

In this section, we have examined the different ways in which former and current users of the building made sense of their experience within the site. What emerged is that while some users have indeed been drawn into the utopian visions of the creators in terms of their support for accessible public arts and cultural space and a historic hotel that is broadly priced, current users of this adapted space has additional and multiple interpretations of the space and the experiences it created. The intended historic hotel and cultural hub have thus variously functioned as a cultural place with both interesting and unnerving histories, a hip boutique hotel, a ‘dark tourism playground’ for young Japanese students on an education trip of the Netherlands, a romantic hideaway for dating couples, a sophisticated node on a business trip and an economically awkward space for an introverted one-star room guest. It has also been an encapsulation of nostalgia and difficult memories for an aged former prison worker where longings for his more productive life moments intersected with some of the more violent ones he would rather not associate with. In examining such convergence and divergence of visions, narratives and practices, we sought to illustrate the agency and relative freedom of individual actors in themed and controlled spaces – spaces shaped and regulated by expert and elite-authorised discourses and practices. In the next concluding section, we briefly outline the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings and study for the understanding of dark tourism, historic hotels and adaptive reuse in heritage tourism.

Conclusion

In this article we have examined the formation of a cultural ‘embassy’ and the multi-tiered price historic Lloyd Hotel as utopian visioning geared at creating art and cultural space in the gentrified Eastern Docklands of Amsterdam through the material uncoupling of the building with its carceral pasts. We have focused in particular on the rationalities shaping the adaptive reuse of the building as heritage accommodation and a cultural hub.
and discussed how the creation of a unique pricing system is largely shaped by contemporary mainstream cultural tourism discourses. In addition, we have reflected on the emphasis placed by the hotel’s management and designers on physical and economic accessibility to the site, and on its inclusive strategies as a cultural hub for a broader community. We have also argued that such a vision for the building to be adapted into a historic hotel with a vibrant and open cultural venue, as opposed to a dark tourism attraction showcasing histories and ‘heavy’ materialities of incarceration and asylum, was crucially influenced by the personal biography of one of the creators.

We have also investigated the workings of power in such a site in terms of the intended shaping of conduct through the reworked architectures of the adapted hotel. We have discussed how the managers of the adapted Lloyd Hotel have sought to realise autonomous cultural subjects through the creation and facilitation of the cultural hub and space and through making the spaces of the hotel accessible. Specifically, we have examined the different ways in which some of the former and current users of the building made sense of and interpret their experience within the site, and sought to show how in some cases such intended autonomous cultural subjects were actually formed by this ‘quasi-freedom machine’ (for example, artists and designers such as Suchan Kinochita and Viktor Wiertz liberally expressing their artistic talents designing the free-access community library of the Lloyd Hotel and participating in exhibitions) and how, in other instances, this governmentality process has not been effective as hotel guests and users were enrolled in other competing narratives and discourses (for example, Japanese students using the site as dark tourism ‘playground’). In doing so, the findings contributed to understandings not only of the fragmented and somehow conflicting experiences that tourists and managers have of this specific heritage site, but also, perhaps, of the negotiated and contested nature of the commodification of history in tourism more in general (Chang et al., 1996; Dann & Seaton, 2001; Minca & Borghi, 2009; Minca & Wagner, 2014) and of its potentially reconciliatory instances (cf. Greenspan, 2005; Lehrer, 2010).

Our findings and analysis also speak to an emerging strand of critique in dark tourism challenging the thanatopsis or darkness of dark tourism experiences (cf. Kidron, 2013; Miles, 2014). Dark tourism experience is not all ‘weighty’ and gloomy and is characterised by more multifaceted, nuanced and casual sets of values (Miles, 2014). Visitors and guests to the Lloyd Hotel have, as our findings illustrated, also demonstrated a range of reported motivations outside what has been considered in current dark tourism research as dark or ‘thana-motivations’ (Dann & Seaton, 2001). Hence, one key implication deriving from this study is the argument for the reconsideration of dark tourism sites and practices within the broader field of heritage tourism.

In addition to the alignment of dark tourism and the historic hotel, our study of the Lloyd Hotel has also analysed the coming together of commercial and community interests, a topic of significance in the conservation literature (cf. Bullen, 2007; Darcy & Wearing, 2009). While the current adaptive reuse literature tends to see these concerns separately, our analysis of the Lloyd Hotel provided insights into how community-oriented ideals of freedom and accessibility operate and intersect with the commercial aspects of running a hospitality establishment. In particular, we have discussed some of the implications of its multi-star pricing system and how such increased accessibility to accommodation in the historic hotel may potentially result in an experience of class distinction or ‘injuries of class’ (Sennett & Cobb, 1972).

In interrogating such convergence and divergence of visions, narratives and practices, we have sought to highlight the agency and relative freedom of interpretation on the part of individual actors in themed and supposedly liberating/liberated spaces – spaces (still)
shaped and regulated by expert and elite-authorised discourses and practices. In doing so, this study hopes to contribute to the existing debates on expert (utopian) visioning (Ong & du Cros, 2012) and governmentality of spaces (cf. Bunnell, 2004) by pointing out the ways in which the ‘liberation machine’ the creators sought to create brought about numerous intended and unintended consequences. The historic hotel marked by a troubled past is then, we argue, not only a mere dark tourism attraction but also an intriguing site where many competing ideals and principles are negotiated. Indeed, while the adaptive reuse of this migrant hotel-turned-refugee camp-turned prison and detention facility provided the removal of some constraining features (bars and locks), practices within the new facility has variously converged with, diverged from and deflected the creators’ original ‘quasi-freedom machine’ cultural utopian visions.

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References


