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Examining ‘Space’ in Peer-to-Peer Accommodation Settings

By offering visitors the opportunity of an alternative accommodation experience, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) accommodation has contributed to the popularity of commercialised homes as a more authentic accommodation setting. Surprisingly, the concept of ‘space’ within P2P accommodation has received minimal academic attention. Utilising Lefebvre’s (1974) theory of the production of space and Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopias, this research note aims to advance understanding on how space is reproduced and interpreted within P2P accommodation; thereby, influencing the practice of both P2P accommodation hosts and guests. Drawing from Airbnb host and guest perceptions and experiences, we offer insights on how a private space is formed and reproduced to serve commercial purposes through a process of continuous negotiation whereby physical, social and symbolic spatial dimensions are attributed and arranged to inform the sharing practice between hosts and guests.

Key words: peer-to-peer accommodation, space, Airbnb, hosts, guests

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Introduction

Peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation has grown exponentially in recent years, transforming the accommodation sector. Defined as online networking platforms through which people rent out for a short period of time available space within their property and/or the entire property (Belk, 2014), P2P accommodation is one of the most prominent forms of the sharing economy. The rapid growth of Airbnb, the market leader of P2P accommodation, exemplifies the importance of this phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, research on P2P accommodation has begun to proliferate. A foray into pertinent literature reveals that academic attention has been paid on numerous topics related to the growth of P2P accommodation. There are studies examining the drivers and/or barriers for engaging into P2P accommodation (e.g. Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018). Additionally, analyses of the associated impacts of the growth of P2P accommodation at the economic, social and environmental levels exists (i.e. Ioannides et al., 2018). More recently, scholars started to look into P2P accommodation guest experiences, evaluating perceptions of service quality, satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017), thereby confirming the interdependence between host service and guest experience within the P2P accommodation context.

Within P2P accommodation, the social interaction between hosts and guests constitutes an important element of the sharing practice (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017), exerting influence not only on guest experiences but also on hosting motives (Belarmino et al., 2017). Nonetheless, within such commercialised home settings, the roles of hosts and guests are largely contested as spatial boundaries between public and private domains, where work and domestic pursuits overlap, are blurred (di Domenico and Lynch, 2007). Surprisingly, the concept of ‘space’ and the way it is constructed and correspondingly interpreted to influence the hospitality experience in P2P accommodation remains an under-

researched area of investigation. Indeed, within P2P accommodation, hosts and guests may attach specific meanings to different spatial components, namely front and back stage space; in turn, the attached meanings may regulate host and guest behaviour by evoking associations of friendliness or intrusiveness, hospitableness or hostility. Consequently, spatial considerations in P2P accommodation contexts are worth investigating.

Drawing from relevant theories including Lefebvre's (1974) production of space and Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias, this research note aims to illuminate existing knowledge on the way 'space' is constructed and, correspondingly, interpreted within the P2P accommodation setting. To this end, we examine the perceptions and experiences of both Airbnb hosts and guests in order to identify the physical, social and symbolic dimensions embodied within the P2P accommodation 'space' and, thereby, understand the conditions under which a private space is formed and arranged for commercial purposes. As such, important implications may arise that add to existing layers of meaning related to commercialised home settings and subsequently impart knowledge on the roles and practice of hosts and guests in P2P accommodation settings.

Background

In an attempt to make sense of tourism phenomena, academic interest on the type, form and nature of tourism spaces has proliferated over the years. Overall, pertinent literature agrees that an analysis of how the physical aspect of tourism space is interpreted socially may reveal important insights on the way relationships and identities are structured within tourism space, as destinations acquire meaning through the spatial practices underlying the tourism activity (Crouch, 2001). Drawing mainly from human geography and political economy theories, studies conclude that within the tourism context the notion of space encompasses

social relations in addition to spatial relations. Consequently, spatial evaluations of tourism spaces cannot be separated from the social dimensions underpinning the tourism activity.

Core to understandings of the relationship between the production of space and the social relations of production is Lefebvre's (1974) theory. Lefebvre identified two distinct levels of space: the natural space, also known as absolute/physical space, and the socially produced space, arguing that space is a complex social construction based on values and socially produced meanings, which in turn influences spatial practices and perceptions. Lefebvre (1991a) conceptualised the production of space as a continual dialectic, labelled 'spatial triad', which consists of: a) perceived space of material spatial practice (e.g. built environments), b) conceived representations of space (e.g. planning discourses that facilitate understanding of perceived space) and c) lived representational spaces (the spaces of everyday life). By diverting attention to the processes of space production, Lefebvre advocated the argument that multiple spaces exist that are socially produced and, as such, highlighted the conflictual, political character of the processes of space production by acknowledging that space may become a means of control and, hence, of power.

Relevant to Lefebvre's spatialization is Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias. In his effort to explain the contrasts and contradictions present in the production of space, Foucault introduced the notion of heterotopias as opposed to utopias. Whilst the latter refers to sites with no real place that present a perfected form of society, the former describe spaces that have more layers of meaning than immediately meet the eye. In other words, the heterotopia is indeterminate or 'other' spaces possessing both real and imagined qualities. Museums, cemeteries and libraries have been recognised as heterotopias wherein material and/or expressive artefacts from distributed locations, cultures and times are gathered in "a place of all times at once" (Foucault, 1986). Evidently, heterotopian space represents multiple and often incompatible spaces brought within a single space (Rokka and Canniford, 2016)

that may become penetrable through an opening and closing system that isolates them. Similar to Lefebvre's belief that there is a multitude of spaces intricately linked to each other, Foucault asserted that we assign different meanings to different spaces depending on their relationship to other spaces (i.e. private/public, family/social, leisure/work).

The context of P2P accommodation, thus, offers an interesting landscape for examining spatial and social relations and, by extent, understanding the roles and practice of P2P accommodation hosts and guests. Specifically, the way space within P2P accommodation is constructed and interpreted maybe influential on the experience and behaviour of guests and hosts respectively. It is likely that hosts and guests in P2P accommodation settings attach different meanings to various spatial components, which in turn may regulate host and guest behaviour and expectations of the accommodation experience. Indeed, the way physical, social and symbolic elements within the P2P accommodation 'space' are attributed and arranged to inform the sharing practice needs to be investigated to unravel the complexities underlying the public/private dual character of P2P accommodation 'space'.

Methodology

The data were collected using overt ethnographic approach, whereby one member of the research team held casual conversations with 25 Airbnb hosts and 25 Airbnb guests in numerous locations within Europe. The ethnographic approach was facilitated by the researcher's involvement in a COST Action funded project on the sharing economy, which allowed her access to Airbnb hosts and guests across Europe. The data were collected from August 2017 to July 2018 and an effort was made to ensure the sample included enough diversity in terms of demographic characteristics (Ritchie et al, 2014). It should be noted that participants were unrelated to each other; in other words, the guests were not staying in the

Airbnb listings of the hosts participating in the study. Questions asked aimed at eliciting answers from guests regarding their perceptions and experiences of the P2P accommodation space as well as hosts' efforts to (re)construct space using physical and/or non-materialistic elements. Additionally, questions were asked about the social relations between hosts and guests, particularly where co-habitation was involved. Notes were kept, which were subsequently analysed by both authors to uncover the perceptions and experiences of the parties involved. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data, whereby emerging topics were grouped into interrelated themes. Sub-categories also emerged, which were combined with pre-identified themes to allow for deeper elaboration on key issues that encourage evidence-based understanding (Hennink et al., 2010).

Discussion

At the first instance, the way that space is constructed by Airbnb hosts to serve commercial purposes as well as to denote hosts' expectations of guest behaviour within their property was sought. In turn, these findings were compared and contrasted with responses from guests regarding the space they rent out on the platform. Findings indicate that material elements in the perceived space are often diminished in their conceived value by guests as power constellations regulate spatial and social relations. For example, several informants stated that they use signs within the property to clarify expected behaviour. As Ciska from Amsterdam noted, "*I put a no smoking sign on the door where the guests stay as I have a strict no smoking inside the house policy*". Nonetheless, such physical elements are often ineffective in their purposes with Ciska explaining that one guest ironically refused to abide by the rule, suggesting that the sign depicted a cigarette whereas he smoked a pipe. Power struggles were particularly evident where co-habitation existed between hosts and guests, with the boundaries in the shared space remaining largely blurred. For instance, Natalie from England commented on how she wants her guests to feel at home in her property yet recalled

an incident where, while watching TV, her guest changed the channel. *“I was stunned...I mean, it is my living room, my TV...you can't just switch the channel!”* the informant argued. Cristina from Barcelona argued that she treats her guests as if they were her flatmates. *“In that way I manage expectations”* she explained who went on to clarify that such practice doesn't always work. *“It depends on the guest as some want more interaction while others lock the door. One time I had a guest who asked me and my friend if she could join in our dinner...that was intrusion to my private 'space' and time I was spending with my friend but I couldn't really refuse, could I?”*. Gabriella from Ireland agreed that sometimes she will go above and beyond as a host and do things like cook breakfast for her guests or drive them around depending on her fondness of them.

Of particular interest are experiences of guests staying in properties where the host was physically absent. As Craig from the US argued, *“we are staying in this flat in the centre of Munich, it is small and comfortable but it is so weird as all of her [host] stuff are there...I mean her clothes, her beauty products all lying around in the flat...she is not there but she is there! You would have thought that she would at least make an effort to conceal her life from her guests”*. On another occasion, Stan from Bulgaria commented *“I think the host thinks my business partner and I must be a gay couple...we arrived to the flat to find a bottle of wine and two glasses and chocolates waiting for us”*, illustrating how hosts attempt to reconstruct the space in accordance to the perceived needs of guests. Indeed, several hosts admitted in making an effort to upgrade the service offered by leaving small items within the flat that they believe will be enjoyed by specific guests including small teddy bears for families with young children, shampoos for respective genders of guests and/or local delicacies. In the words of Marios from Cyprus, *“I am not there to offer daily service but I can leave my 'stigma' in the property through physical items the guests will find and I think will appreciate...maybe they will then give me a higher score as a host”*. Evidently, host service

in P2P accommodation appears to manifest through physical elements in the space which in turn carry a symbolic meaning. As such, space within P2P accommodation acquires a form of ‘otherness’ which does not necessarily fit within either public or private domains; rather, it is characterised by a synthesis of ‘spaces’ meshed together to form places embodying hierarchical structurings emanating from power trajectories between hosts and guests.

Conclusion

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the concept of ‘space’ within P2P accommodation. Specifically, we draw from Airbnb hosts’ and guests’ perceptions and experiences to understand how space in P2P accommodation is constructed and, correspondingly, interpreted in accordance to Lefebvre’s and Foucault’s conceptualisations of space and, particularly, along physical, social and symbolic dimensions. As such, we believe that significant insights may be gained with regard to the roles and practice of hosts and guests in P2P accommodation. Overall, we conclude that space in P2P accommodation has a binary character as it influences and is influenced by the social relations between guests and hosts. On the one hand, the way space is constructed and interpreted may be contradicting although it seems that the construction of space serves to establish boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on behalf of guests. On the other hand, space is to a great extent used as a platform for negotiating trajectories of power as emanating from the social relations between hosts and guests. As such, we conclude that readings of space configurations in P2P accommodation are useful in understanding the roles and practices of hosts and guests. In this context, the role of Airbnb as a mediator of space configurations is important, particularly in terms of how space images are projected and, thereby, influencing perceptions of space. Notwithstanding, as P2P accommodation continues to grow and is gradually transforming – as recently evidenced by efforts of Airbnb to tap on the luxury

market – space considerations demand greater academic attention, as they carry marketing, legal and social implications. In light of the dynamic nature of P2P accommodation growth, space considerations reshape conceived roles, behaviours and responsibilities of the parties involved, namely hosts, guests and Airbnb itself.

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