

# RELEVANCE OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE FOR DESTINATION CHOICE IN AUSTRIA

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## ABSTRACT

The local landscape is of high relevance for destination choice in central Europe. Landscape character is influenced by the geological formation, land use and in many cases also by the traditional construction of private houses, their integration into the landscape and use of local materials. However, many tourism destinations in Austria are not aware of the high relevance of private buildings for the overall landscape character and destination choice. In several rural destinations, a large number of new, modern buildings with a more or less unspecific, generic style is in the process of changing the specific character of the destination. The presented case study analyses the situation in the Nature Park Pöllauer Valley in the south-eastern part of the Austrian Alps by asking tourists and potential tourists about their perception and their preferences. In an online survey, respondents were asked to evaluate different types of private buildings and to decide whether they were likely to support or to disturb the character of the destination. The findings underline the relevance of local architecture for destination choice and suggest that local councils should regulate the development of new buildings.

*Keywords: architecture of private homes, destination choice, nature park tourism.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Destination choice has been a significant part of tourism research since the 1980s [1, 2], aiming to understand, anticipate, model and influence travellers' decisions. Key components of all these models are the tourists themselves (including their lifestyles, values, experiences and socio-economic and behavioural preferences), information and marketing (including product design, pricing, advertising, travel arrangements) and the attributes of the destination (including accommodation, activities, local attractions, climatic conditions and landscape characteristics) [3–5]. The latter also includes architecture and the built environment.

The relation between tourism and architecture has many facets. On the one hand, it is clear that architecture contributes to destination choice and product development with monuments and buildings attracting tourists because of their rich history, their beauty, their celebrity and international recognition [6]. In the late 1980s, modern architecture also claimed to contribute significantly to tourism development, to the local brand and to global awareness. The importance of modern architecture for the image and attractiveness of a destination and the beginning of significant tourism development is often described as the 'Bilbao-effect', referring to the significant changes in Bilbao after the construction of the Guggenheim Museum by star architect Frank Gehry in 1997. The development of wine tourism in Spain as well as in Canada and European wine destinations is also significantly linked to modern, innovative architecture [7].

On the other hand, regarding tourism development, several authors perceive new architecture as a significant deterioration of the landscape and the existing built environment. Holleran

[8] analysed the physical changes at beach fronts on the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast after 1989 and explores how these changes are perceived by the local population. He argues that the increasingly urbanised beachfronts have quickly shifted from a 'symbol of the post-socialist good life' to a 'manifestation of the failure' of contemporary Bulgarian society to protect the environment and the quality of the shoreline as significant common goods.

In this context, the global similarity of tourism infrastructure and hotels has also been widely criticised. Many destinations have lost their local identity and the uniqueness of their tourism products [9–11].

The literature review revealed several solutions to solve this problem.

Heide *et al.* [12], Takinami [13], MacCannell [14] and Britton [15] argue that the experience of a special 'ambience' should be a key concept in tourism. This special ambience often led to the protection or reconstruction of special buildings and ensembles.

In order to provide a special atmosphere and ambience, even a fake, re-designed or staged architecture or built environment seems to be better for tourism development than the uniform and faceless architecture of many destinations [16, 17]. Levi [16] showed that the public's perception and attitude towards fake historic architecture is actually positive. Levi's results demonstrate that tourists can discriminate between historic and fake historic architecture, and that fake historic architecture does not reduce support for historic preservation. The preference for traditional styles and/or historic buildings in the context of tourism development led to a critical discussion about the role of architecture. If we base our current architecture on traditional elements of style, are we 'learning from lost landscapes' [18], or are we falling into 'nostalgia' traps [19], or is this nothing more than a kind of 'architectural cloning' [20].

While a lot of literature only regards tourism buildings, recent research also focusses on the role of the existing traditional built environment in the respective destinations. Giannakopoulou and Kaliampakos [21] analysed the social benefit deriving from protecting the traditional architecture in the mountainous village of Sirako in Greece by asking local residents and tourists. Their research findings revealed a strong support for the protection of the traditional architecture, followed by high willingness to pay (WTP). Both residents and visitors pointed out that local heritage, if well-preserved, will influence tourism development positively.

A representative survey of German tourists interested in summer holidays in the Alpine area showed that the type of the settlement in the destination is of high relevance for different segments [22, 23]. Tourists interested in nature experience preferred small settlements. Tourists interested in fun and action preferred larger units.

The literature review also suggests that the maintenance of traditional architecture for tourism is more relevant in a rural setting than in an urban built environment. Following Romeiß-Stracke [9], it is not only the architecture for tourism influencing the attractiveness of a destination but the everyday architecture in the surrounding landscape as well.

In the presented study, we analyse the attractiveness of 'normal' architecture in a rural tourism destination as perceived by tourists. We want to analyse if certain local traditional design elements make a difference or whether modern buildings are perceived as a positive or neutral element in the rural destination.

## 2 THE SITUATION IN AUSTRIA AND THE CASE STUDY AREA

Austria is characterised by many attractive, unique landscapes and related building traditions. The local construction of houses often reflects different forms of land use, climatic conditions and the availability of local resources [24]. Figure 1 shows the characteristic housing styles



Figure 1: The so-called house-landscapes for Styria, the south-eastern part of Austria in 1948. The circle highlights the described study area [25].

in the region of Styria in Austria in the early 19th century. The picture shows that buildings were at least half made of wood in the forested areas in the north, while stone houses were dominant in the less forested south-east.

In the 1950s the use of traditional styles or style elements changed also in rural areas. New demands, new materials, fashions and the so-called modern lifestyle changed not only the character of family homes and buildings for agricultural use but also the overall landscape character.

Some Austrian villages – such as Alpbach in Tyrol – recognised very early on that these changes may affect their attractiveness for tourists. They have regulated the overall character of the village since 1958 based on a very strict building code applying both to tourism buildings and private homes. Therefore, the village is still characterised by wooden constructions, large roofs and local materials. Hotel managers now use this unique character for marketing purposes. However many tourism destinations in Austria are not aware of the high relevance of private buildings for the overall landscape character and destination choice. In several rural destinations a high proportion of new, modern buildings with a more or less unspecific, generic style is in the process of changing the unique character of the destination.

Although the Austrian building law offers many possibilities to regulate size, the materials, the shape of the roof and many other aspects, these possibilities are hardly ever used. Architects underline that this would limit the individual rights of the owners and that there must be room for new design and a timely expression of modern lifestyle. Only few communities, such as Alpbach in Tyrol or Tamsweg in Salzburg, are actively using the legal possibilities to maintain their uniqueness.

For our study we selected the Nature Park Pöllau Valley in the south-eastern part of Austria. The valley is still part of the Alpine chain, but lies at its very eastern end. About 8300 people inhabit an area of about 121 km<sup>2</sup>. The park region is characterised by an extensive,

traditional land use, with many old fruit trees, old orchards, some small vineyards, crop fields and forests. The old fruit trees, in particular, give the landscape a distinctive character that attracts tourists in all seasons. The old orchards also play a pivotal role for local biodiversity. The outstanding landscape beauty, the biodiversity and the unique character were the reason for this area's protection more than 30 years ago.

As highlighted in Fig. 1, the region is characterised by two different types of traditional house construction. Wooden constructions were dominant in the steeper areas of higher elevation with a lot of forests, while in the flat, open landscape, stone houses with one storey constituted the typical architecture.

The valley offers a wide range of opportunities for overnight stays from private rooms up to highly decorated 4\*hotels. The valley also offers the opportunity to stay in old farm houses, as well as new infrastructure in the style of old Alpine villages.

### 3 METHODS

The study is based on an online survey using a snowball sampling within the metropolitan area of Vienna [26]. The only precondition was that respondents should be interested in spending their holidays or a weekend in the Pöllau Valley. Beside general questions about motivation, preferred architecture in the tourism destination and socio-demographic questions, we also showed respondents pictures of newly constructed buildings and asked them whether they fit into this destination. Overall, 255 responses to the questionnaire were valid and analysed with the software SPSS 17.

### 4 MAIN FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Description of the sample

The sample consists of 53% female and 47% male respondents. Half the respondents (49.9%) are below the age of 40 years and the other half older than 40 years. The age groups between 20 and 29 years and between 40 and 49 years are the largest segments (30% and 27%, respectively). Overall, the sample is well educated, with 50% having a university degree. Most of the respondents live in Vienna (49%) or lower Austria (23%), 27% are from other Austrian regions. For the Pöllau valley, Lower Austria and Vienna have been the most important source regions for guests in the past – for holidays as well as for weekend or day trips. Most of the respondents (52%) currently live in urban environments with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 30% in rural areas (villages with less than 4000 inhabitants), the remaining 18% live in small to medium sized cities. About half the sample is interested in a day visit to the valley (54%), while 46% are interested in holidaying there. Most of the respondents would be accompanied by family members, their partners or friends. Less than 1% would book an organised trip to visit the Pöllau Valley. For those choosing the Pöllau valley for their holidays, hotels are the preferred location for overnight stays, followed by holiday apartments and private offers. About 40% of respondents stated that they are interested in architecture, 38% are somewhat interested in architecture and 22% show little interest in this subject.

#### 4.2 Relevance of local architecture for tourism and outdoor recreation experiences

Respondents were asked about the factors which are important for their destination choice (see Fig. 2). Very important are the landscape, nature experience offers, a harmonious

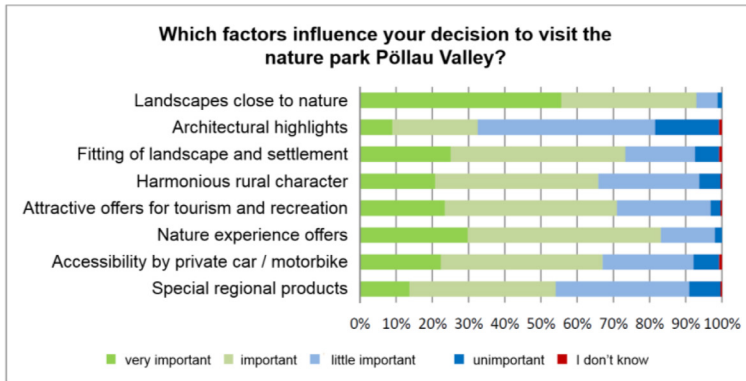


Figure 2: Factors influencing the decision to visit the nature park (N = 255).

integration of settlements into the landscape and attractive offers for tourism and recreation. Already less important are accessibility by car, regional products and the rural character. The least relevant factor is the experience of architectural highlights. The area of the park does contain several historically important buildings (a gothic pilgrim church, a castle and a famous baroque church), but this is an important factor for only about one-third of the respondents. Here, we found significant differences between age groups. The famous buildings of the Pöllau valley are significantly more important for the age group older than 50 years ( $p < 0.000$ ). Attractive offers for tourism and recreation are more relevant for the younger respondents below 30 years ( $p = 0.009$ ).

Furthermore, respondents underlined that the overall appearance of a location in the village centres is relevant for their holidays, and not only the respective offers. A clear structure and houses of a typical regional character are perceived as attractive in this context. Concerning the role and relevance of modern buildings, respondents were evenly divided between about 50% who agree that houses differing from the typical regional character are perceived as negative and the other 50% who only partly agree or disagree.

The majority, however, agrees that a mix of several different styles disturbs the appearance of a location (see Fig. 3).

An in-depth analysis and comparison by age group, sex and tourist versus day visitor showed only few differences. The evaluation of the built environment and overall appearance of the settlement is more relevant for respondents older than 40 years ( $p = 0.002$ ). Elderly age groups (40+) also perceive a mix of different building styles as more disturbing than the younger clientele. Concerning the appearance and character of the settlement, tourists are more sensitive than day visitors ( $p < 0.000$ ).

#### 4.3 Evaluation of different buildings

In the next step we presented the respondents with a selection of nine houses which are all typical for the settlements in the park (see Fig. 4). All pictures were taken in the park or at its borders. All houses were recently restored or built for housing purposes. Some of the new houses are close to typical regional style (Examples 2 and 9), reflect the regional style in their material, overall shape and construction, but in a modern interpretation (Examples 1, 3, 5 and 6), while others are characterised by a modern style without any references to local material

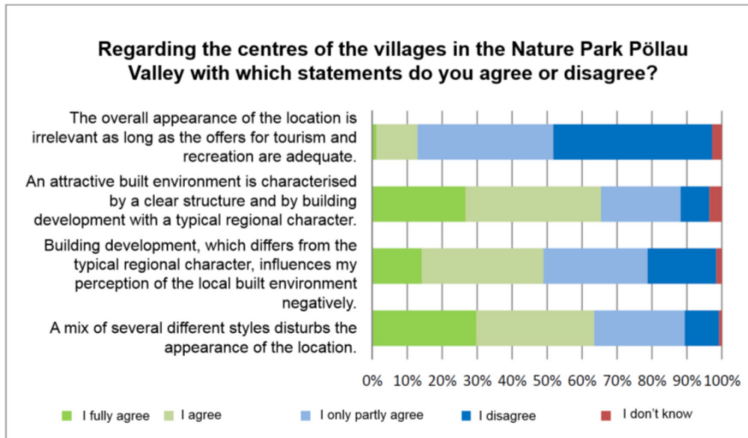


Figure 3: Evaluation of the built environment and overall appearance of the settlement (N = 255).

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3	Example 4	Example 5	Example 6	Example 7	Example 8	Example 9
Picture									
General Attractiveness	3.07	2.54	2.86	2.59	3.03	2.39	3.09	3.5	2.24
Attractiveness in the context of the Nature Park	3.14	2.37	2.94	3.16	2.74	2.45	3.49	3.8	1.61
Arrangement of windows	Pos. 68%	Pos. 60%	Pos. 49%	Pos. 43%	Pos. 25%	Pos. 67%	Pos. 23%	Pos. 21%	Pos. 83%
Colour of the facade	Pos. 36%	Pos. 60%	Pos. 52%	Pos. 82%	Pos. 40%	Pos. 78%	Pos. 74%	Pos. 50%	Pos. 72%
Colour of the roof	Pos. 70%	Pos. 83%	Pos. 76%	Pos. 68%	Pos. 69%	Pos. 70%	Pos. 58%	Pos. 33%	Pos. 69%
Roof design	Pos. 54%	Pos. 75%	Pos. 62%	Pos. 52%	Pos. 61%	Pos. 63%	Pos. 42%	Pos. 27%	Pos. 81%

Figure 4: Evaluation of nine buildings of different style. The arrows show whether the evaluation of attractiveness in the context of the Nature Park Pöllau Valley is higher or lower compared to the general attractiveness. Percentages summarise the positive perception by the respondents (N = 255).

or traditional construction types (Examples 4, 7 and 8). We asked the respondents to evaluate the attractiveness of the respective buildings from their perspective (a) in general and (b) in the context of the Nature Park (1 means high attractiveness and 5 means low attractiveness). The results in Fig. 4 show that the respondents always considered the context of the respective building in their evaluation. Modern buildings were considered to be less suitable in the Nature Park Pöllau Valley. The best evaluation was given to those buildings which were close to the traditional style (Examples 2 and 9). Here, the overall evaluation was not as good as the evaluated attractiveness in the context of the Nature Park.

A separate evaluation of the arrangement of windows, and the colour of facade and roof helps interpret the positive or negative evaluations. All examples with asymmetric windows were evaluated less positively, no matter if the example was modern or more traditional (see

Examples 5, 7, 8). A coloured facade seems to be a sensitive issue. White colours and wood were highly accepted. In most cases, other colours led to a negative attractiveness, except for a warm brownish yellow. Facades where significant parts of the building are coloured in two different colours, such as 'light yellow and grey' or 'light grey and red', were perceived as less attractive (Examples 1 and 8). The roof design also seems to be a relevant attribute. Traditional shapes were preferred. A flat roof in combination with technical infrastructure (photovoltaic system) was less preferred.

The statistical analyses showed that all differences between the stated attractiveness in general and in relation to the Nature Park were significant. We also tried to find similarities or differences between different age groups, day visitors versus tourists, and male versus female respondents. Repeated and significant preferences in favour or against a certain style element, for example by a younger age group, were not visible. This was one of the most surprising results.

#### 4.4 Management options

The legal instruments in Austria allow an influence on the shape of settlements, as well as a prevention of the use of certain materials, colours or design elements. However, compared to Germany, these legal possibilities are not often used. Architects and owners often argue that they want to be free in their decision-making and design preferences. Therefore, respondents were asked whether they find it necessary to steer the overall development through the respective communities in the Nature Park, from a tourism perspective (see Fig. 5).

Nearly all respondents supported the idea of steering development through an additional consulting for building owners (93% agreed or fully agreed). The majority of respondents also agreed with the implementation of clear design principles safeguarding the typical regional style (62% agreed or fully agreed). We did not find any significant differences between different age groups, tourists versus day visitors or male versus female respondents for both statements. The opposite possibility, a lack of any regulation, was rejected by the majority. Only 22% believed that the communities should not regulate building development in the Nature Park area. Here, detailed analyses did show some differences between age groups. The youngest age group (under 30 years) did not support regulations as much as the older age groups (65% support vs. more than 82% support, respectively).

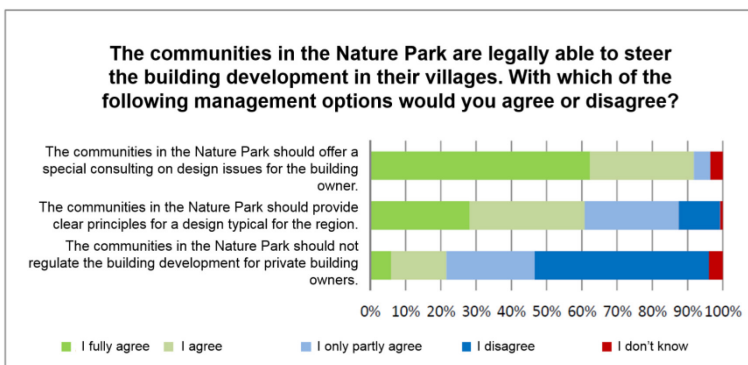


Figure 5: Acceptance of management options (N = 246).

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The presented study analyses a research field which has not been in the focus of tourism research in the past. The main purpose was to learn more about the role of the settlements themselves and the regional elements for the experience of tourists and their perception of a destination. The findings are of relevance for many Austrian destinations and show that, in rural destinations such as the Pöllau valley, architecture has little relevance for destination choice but plays a crucial role for the overall appearance of the locality and the atmosphere of the destination.

However, the study has some methodological limitations. One can question whether we selected the 'right', most representative buildings for the study out of the wide diversity to choose from. The selection could have included more examples but pre-tests showed that more than nine examples would have reduced the willingness to fill in the questionnaire and increased a possible bias. The convenience sample and the number of 255 respondents may limit the interpretation of the presented data. However, the survey was very balanced concerning the age groups and addressed the main target groups of the Nature Park, traditionally coming from the urban area in and around Vienna.

Overall we believe that the survey helps to understand the relevance of 'every-day architecture' for tourists and day visitors in a tourism destination. Of course, we did not expect this kind of architecture to be able to initiate something like the Bilbao-effect. This study aimed to identify the role of every-day architecture for the tourism relevance of the landscape and settlements, and analyse the perception of design elements and styles by tourists and day visitors. Here, the findings confirm some of the early warnings by tourism research [9, 10, 16, 24]. The study reveals that new, modern architecture in the Nature Park, which is still characterised by a local style and tradition, does not have a positive effect on tourism, but a negative one:

- Use of two different colours, asymmetric windows and platform roofs may be accepted in general, but not in the Nature Park area.
- The loss of local identity and traditions regarding materials, construction and design may be acceptable in urban or peri-urban areas, but not in tourism destinations.

Every-day architecture has an influence on the unique atmosphere of a destination and should therefore be in the scope of communities in tourism destinations in Austria. Tourists and visitors in our survey made clear that they appreciate strict regulations and guidelines to protect the unique built environment they are coming to experience. In Austria, legal preconditions for the protection of typical style elements exist, but are rarely implemented. Architects and building owners often argue against these regulations. They deny the relevance of each single house for the overall atmosphere of a settlement and long-term effects on tourism. However, the findings from the Pöllau Valley show that consideration of just some elements, such as the saddle roof or a symmetric distribution of windows, would suffice to meet basic requirements.

We hope that this study will enhance the discussion about architecture in rural tourism destinations. The findings suggest that thoughtlessness or carelessness may affect tourism development in the long term. Besides promoting public discussion on the matter, communities should consider implementing adequate design byelaws to steer the development in their destination in a transparent manner. National and international examples [13, 18, 19, 20] show that a concept to maintain and strengthen architecture with unique local elements can be used for marketing purposes and raises tourists' awareness for architecture and the local heritage.



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