

VISITORS' CENTRES – NEW COORDINATES OF SERBIAN RURAL AREAS IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract. *Visitor centres are mandatorily info-promotional facilities, often focused on service and accommodation, and less often on research and education, and which should satisfy different needs of a specific natural or an artificially created area by means of a narrower or wider range of different activities. They are very important as special purpose points for development of a tourist offer in a specific wider area, but also as marketing and promotional markers for popularization and attractiveness, i.e. "new recognisability" of individual locations in a narrower spatial sense.*

As modern benchmarks, they can use their functionality and design symbolism to become important generators of development and increase the number of visits to rural areas, where specific sites are most often located. This paper examines these specific functionally designed facilities from the viewpoint of potential typological divisions, empirical patterns, i.e. the overview of needs for their individual aspects in rural spaces and areas of Serbia, while taking into consideration the environment and experience they are to present to users.

Key words: *Visitors' centres, rural areas, info-points, habitats on tourist routes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the circumstances of altered natural living conditions (where the climate factor is only one consequential but important factor, and which takes the role of a generator of further environment development), as well as a more significantly altered social-economic environment framework, almost all aspects of life are constantly reviewed, and not solely in Serbia. Almost daily, dynamic and diverse sociological changes in the rhythm of life, routine behavioural habits and human relations (between people and between people and the environment) irrevocably lead to deliberations on the quality of established or spontaneously evolved attitudes towards potential and possible resources of future social development.

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Tourism, i.e. all its applicable traditional and contemporary forms, represents one of the more important established potentials of further development of Serbian socio-spatial framework. Although publicly accepted as such, it still remains in the framework of routine understanding and doctrine of tourist services, confined in an ancient, out-dated view of current issues, changed demand and needs of users. If we also take into consideration the rural character of the majority of Serbia, where the essential items of potential tourist offer are located, exist and are manifested, it becomes clear that the organization of modern use of these potentials primarily lacks the informational, and then all other (reception, accommodation, presentation, education, culture, recreation, and accompanying) new or updated suprastructures.

In that sense, the overview of the advantages of installing new and existing (i.e. possessing a predetermined purpose) aspects of tourist activities in the form of Visitors' centres (in the wide range of their manifest forms) located in the specific and noteworthy spaces, presents an attempt to affirm a new approach to the animation of clients in the area of tourist economy, but also a contribution to the redefining of the typology of implied architectural contents in specific natural and artificial environments.

Apart from their rural character, the areas of special natural and artificial features in Serbia are also characterized (with well-known exceptions) by a specific measure of preservation, not only in the sense of nature and environment quality, but also from the aspect of autochthonous visual and ambient-related values of the environment. The reason for such a favourable environment for future action and development can be found primarily in the social-ideological inferiority and disregard for rural territories in the second half of the last century, but also in the lack of social circumstances, initiatives, investments and general (not solely material) poverty during the last decades of the transition between centuries.

In the transition social-economic circumstances, in the atmosphere of rare investments with often uncertain profitability, with pioneer investments in the initiation of the development of various underdeveloped areas, the flexibility of new programmes and rationalization, i.e. multifunctionality, become crucial planning factors. Apart from the aforementioned, in the conditions of the permanent lack of resources required for the construction of new content, resourcefulness and initiative-taking in reconstruction, adaptation, refurbishment, innovation, repurposing and updating, hence maintenance, of the full range of existing facilities (a large number of which exists in the field) becomes a social behaviour imperative, and a basic aspect of rational action with regards to attempts to develop certain environments.

There are many various activities and facilities that can be designed, combined and placed by means of the establishment of Visitors' centre programmes, from the minimum facilities (outlooks and info-points), through standard ones (the usual tourist service combination with potential functional extensions), to complex combinations (which also include special purpose spaces in direct link with specific location-related predispositions - archaeological sites, wine routes and wineries, historical sites, ethno-vernacular groups and units, areas with special natural characteristics, nature reserves...).

Since Serbia's development basis is founded on the improvement and modernization of agriculture, as one of the fundamental branches of economy, and its related activities such as tourism [6], and since it is to be expected that the investments and area activation efforts will focus on villages and rural areas, i.e. tourist potential; it is, hence, logical that, architects should improve their knowledge not only in relation to building design issues, but with regard to the accompanying areas of life, primarily those that the majority of

them will have the chance to design and construct; that primarily relates to real needs in rural areas (diverse agricultural facilities, economy housing, design of elements and complete villages), as well as tourism-related ones (accommodation, catering, commercial services, presentations, manifestation, education, recreation and other specific needs...).

2. PROBLEM WITH TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS OF SERBIA

Although exceptionally rich with potential tourist locations, rural Serbia, barring rare exceptions, is organizationally inaccessible to consumers with different needs and interests. In order to clarify the need for Visitors' centres in the aforementioned areas, we will provide a brief review of the basic reasons for such tendencies.

In the circumstances of an increasingly faster and more stressful way of life, the tourist offer consumers are less likely to go vacationing once or twice a year in the framework of usual summer (seaside) and winter (skiing) packages. The need for more frequent but shorter vacations, which should possess an active recreational and learning component, is becoming increasingly pronounced. Such packages require a different philosophy and manner of organization in tourism. Namely, this is based on the principle of continuous 24-hour work of tour operators who accompany tourists on their journey, and which excludes the usual organization based on change of tourist shifts after a several-day-long stay at a single destination, but is instead based on a dynamic change of trip locations and overnight stays, with visits to important sights in the framework of a predetermined tour. The lack of modern tourist offers and modern concept of the use of potentials is but one of the reasons for the poor development of tourism in the rural areas of Serbia [2].

We can look for the second reason in the lack of attention paid to tourist activities organizing based on contemporary principles of thematic units – clusters. Although top-quality conditions for organization of specialized trips (quite often called routes, hence the Roman Emperor Routes, Wine Routes; or tours – hence the Monastery Tour, Danube Tour, Fruska Gora Tour...) exist, few of them are actually implemented in practice. What seems to be becoming an axiom in Serbian tourism is the organization of different annual events (lasting usually one, less often several days) in different towns and villages, and which are rarely dedicated to cultural content, and more often limited to different culinary fairs (the so-called "jadas" – *slaninijadas* i.e. bacon fests, *kobasicijadas*, i.e. sausage fests, *kupusijadas*, i.e. cabbage fests...), and which cannot possibly present a foundation for serious tourist activities, since nothing else happens all year long at these locations. Tourism based on various, differently motivated events taking place throughout the year can survive in bigger cities, since by rule of thumb, some kind of event is always taking place in them. However, a continuous annual tourist offer in smaller towns and rural settlements and areas has to be differently founded and organized.

The third important reason for unsuccessful tourism in rural regions is the issue with authority over and coordination of tourist activities and facilities in a specific area. Natural attractions, entities and related content representing a single tourist brand usually cover the territories belonging to several municipalities, and sometimes to more than one District. In such cases the main issue with the organization of top-quality, well-designed tourism most often lies in the lack of initiative in relation to maintenance of facilities and design of programmes in their proper territory for certain administrations, as well as the

unwillingness to cooperate with neighbouring administrations and jointly use the relevant resources. Apart from the aforementioned, the lack of interest of municipal authorities for facilities lying exclusively under their authority remains another issue. Often, it is also an issue of the lack of organizing expertise, and bad management, which are aggravated by excess arrogance and the unwillingness to contract an external expert for assistance with the organization of the tourist offer.

The aforementioned reasons, which represent only some of the unfavourable circumstances impacting the development of high-quality tourism in rural areas, paint a clear picture of the situation in the rural Serbia tourist offer. These circumstances inspire us to consider attempts aimed at improvement of the tourist offer, which would be based on the establishing of new coordinates, networked locations, habitat-centred facilities and activities or memory places. If we would like for such destinations to be at least minimally functional (e.g. only an overlook, a place with a beautiful view), or to possess a more complex multifunctional structure (appropriate for longer stays, seminars, congresses, recreation, research, thematic, presentation, commercial or marketing events...), that would largely depend on the position in the hierarchy of related locations, but also on the specific features of individual locations, requirements for a longer stay, potential special protection duties, i.e. the size of the territory and the site, geographical unit or area which we wish to promote. It is implied that such review takes into consideration both the construction of new ones and use and rehabilitation of existing facilities.

3. VISITORS' CENTRES AS ELEMENTS OF TOURIST ROUTE NETWORK

Visitors' centres are primarily educational facilities, which endeavour to provide information to its visitors, as well as new insights on the specific traits of a particular area they are located in, and thus provide a significant contribution to development and promotion of rural areas, i.e. the dissemination of different, largely positive views of them.

Development of Visitors' centres is encouraged by the interest of visitors and the need for different services within a tourist offer in a certain area. Tourism as a separate branch of economy is being increasingly forced to take initiative in the generation, popularization and presentation of less obvious specific characteristics of specific areas in the global market, i.e. in the deliberate creation of an image or brand of specific sites, with the aim of increasing the number of visitors [1].

In this aspect, rural areas possess a huge potential, primarily due to their natural and cultural diversity. The term "rural" can encompass non-urban or even suburban areas, whose basic physical and geographical characteristics are determined in the framework of the use of land for agricultural production and forestry. The considerable interest of the international market for a rural tourist experience has initiated the modernization of the said offer, i.e. facilities, which, again, have to correlate with modern lifestyles.

The crucial factor in the planning of future Visitors' centre facilities should be linked to the choice of the proper location and content [3]. The surrounding area has to possess specific features attractive to future visitors. Tourist activities and establishment of such facilities in rural areas encourage their direct economic development. The interest of visitors also can be focused on individual households (a parallel can be drawn to the expansion of ethno-farms during the last few decades) within a settlement, so they can indirectly become elements of "visitor" composition. Households are in this manner

promoted for the purposes of tourist activities and transformed into accommodation facilities, illustrating the international trend of translating ex-agricultural entities to different types of tourist products. Apart from those, the rare historical vernacular architecture heritage sites (such as Staro Selo in Sirogojno) can also assume a new function of tourism route stops [7]. In the geographical sense, these examples can play an important role in the establishment of Visitors' centre network.



Fig. 1 Facilities with the potential to assume the modern function of benchmarks – Visitors' centres in their proper communities: Ethno farm (backyard) Latkovac near Aleksandrovac, and the Open Air Museum – Staro Selo in Sirogojno, formed from preserved and transported vernacular buildings. (From the authors' archive)

It would also be pertinent to mention large number of facilities, either in rural settlements or outside them, which have lost their initial importance and purpose, and which could – post-rehabilitation – become a synergy points for tourism in Serbia (cooperative buildings, trade cooperatives, depopulated schools, valuable and rehabilitation-available vernacular facilities with traditional construction elements, abandoned barracks, and many other existing forms in rural areas who can be used owing to their preserved intrinsic value). This would achieve at least two positive effects: rescue of buildings from falling into disrepair, and placement of new functions important for survival of villages through tourism development.

The phenomenon where whole new settlements, such as Drvengrad at Mokra Gora and Kamengrad in Visegrad (Republika Srpska), are constructed, only confirm the exceptional need for this type of content. These two examples present typical cases of creation of entities which can be called and treated as Visitors' centres in the real sense of the word. Apart from possessing urban planning and architectural solutions which fully acknowledge the tradition and region in which they were established, they also, due to their functions, represent a magnet to visitors who come to the region with the specific purpose of visiting exactly these locations, while taking the opportunity to get familiar with the wider area and neighbouring facilities and amenities. Visegrad, with its famous old bridge was no longer attractive to visitors travelling the region since they would already have had the opportunity to see the famous bridge on river Drina. A new town – Visitors' centre – provides a new motivation for second visit and improvement of the wider area. It can satisfy a whole range of need, starting from the basic ones such as short

or long stay, overnight stay, catering, trade, information, but also much more complex demands related to culture, education or knowledge [8].



Fig. 2 New ethno-style settlements, as a specific type of Visitors' centres with complete packages of events and activities (Drvengrad Mecavnik in Mokra gora on Tara Mountain and Kamengrad, Andricgrad on the river Drina – Visegrad / RS) (From the authors' archive)

The same usefulness-based philosophy applies to Mecavnik, where visitors come not only for basic services, but also in order to participate in now traditional festivals, concerts, events, and the wider region also provides interesting sights, such as a rehabilitated narrow-gauge heritage railway, Sargan Eight, and other attractions in the direction of Uzice and Visegrad, or Bajina Basta across the Tara mountain.

Although perhaps under a different name and with a different intent, the authors of these new towns have achieved that which is proposed in this paper, all in order to improve the tourist offer in the rural Serbia.

4. CURRENT FORMS, STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF VISITORS' CENTRES

Visitors' Centres have become a synonym for multi-purpose, flexible structures. The complexity of their services reflects the complexity of modern social needs. The multi-purpose role provides an advantage in organization of different programmes enabling the active functioning of the centre throughout the year, which is a primary prerequisite if we desire for such services to survive, be cost effective and able to promote a specific area, which all results in the commercialization as the final goal.

We can notice two basic types of Visitors' centres. The first represents individual info-spatial facilities (info-points), which serve exclusively to provide necessary information and additional knowledge about the relevant site to the visitors. The second are multipurpose flexible structures which, unlike the first type, provide various additional options, ranging from education, accommodation, relaxation, museum and gallery exhibits, organization of conferences, to the presentation of production processes, tasting of products, and the commercial aspect related to their sale and placement (as is the case, e.g. with vineyards and Visitors' centres located in them) [4].



Fig. 3 Primary visitor spots: A vista of lake Perucac from "The Cross" on Tara (from "Drina" monograph – Institute for textbooks and teaching materials – Belgrade), and Lookout Timmelsjoch – Austria/Italy (Architect WernerTscholl) on the cliff side lay-by (journal C3 no. 359/2013.)

Newly formed spatial structures do not necessarily have to be physically connected. They can be integrated into a system of pavilions with several independent facilities. In that way the facilities can be constructed in stages, i.e. the offer can be incrementally improved, depending on the interest of potential consumers. Of course in such cases, especial care needs to be paid to the aesthetics of the complex being developed during a longer time period, i.e. the form of the whole structure needs to be defined while the idea is still being formulated.

If we set aside the primary (basic) Visitors' centre type - a physically and design-wise marked point in space, which can possess a bare function, but which still has a specific purpose and intent (e.g. an overlook) - and move from philosophical observation of content phenomenon to programme in a more detail, then the basic content of Visitors' centres should consist of an information/presentation (exhibit-oriented and commercial) section, with a small cafe-bar for refreshments, toilets, and, potentially, an appropriate storage place.

The centre can then be amended with the next related step – space dedicated to education and research, such as all-purpose halls for lectures, screenings, plays and performances, exterior and interior amphitheatres, classrooms (workshops), internet-rooms, media libraries, libraries ...



Fig. 4 Memorial Home in Ravna Gora (designed by architect Spasoje Kronic) by the structure of its facilities represents a Visitors' centre at a historical site, with basic (info-presentation) and minimal accommodation facilities (From the authors' archive)

All these facilities make a centre more useful, but also cause a need for several-days-long visits, the visitors thus becoming users, which in turn requires more ambitious programmes, as well as the construction of rooms for overnight stays, common space for social gatherings, and a restaurant with a kitchen.

If we were to develop the programme further from the aspect of rest and relaxation, it could contain spa and wellness facilities, potentially a gym, a smaller swimming pool and exterior sports facilities, and in the case the centre is sports-focused, also interior halls for some of the sports.

On the other hand, if the Visitors' centre was to be located next to some specific facilities typical of the surrounding landscape, such as vineyards, it could contain a modest production line (winery) aimed at presentation of the production process and wine preservation, as well as the premises for presentations and tastings, i.e. the premises for commercial sales. This, in turn, implies the need for special purpose restaurants, such as taverns.

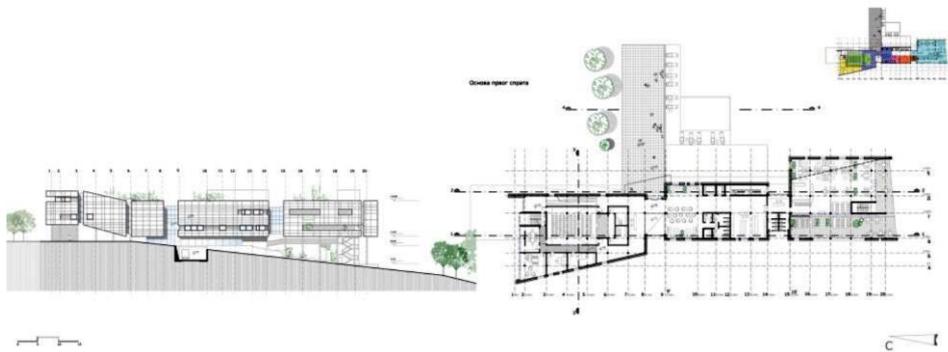


Fig. 5 Final Master – project, diploma dissertation, Visitors' – oenological centre, next to Rajacke pivnice (brewery) – Negotin (author M. Arandjelovic, mentor A. Videnovic)

Hence, depending on the ambition, investment cost-effectiveness, and for purposes of attractiveness and exclusivity, such facilities can always be amended and enriched with different additional content depending on the specific features of the environment they are supposed to promote, and the decision of the investor on the level of investment into amenities.

Visitors' Centres should be defined as attraction spaces and active elements of the natural environment with which they are actively interacting. The compatibility of facility and environment is the goal to strive for during the planning of such structures. They are designed as exhibition, pavilion, spatial compositions representing the autochthonous culture and protected natural riches of a specific area in a completely rational manner. This is precisely why the rural areas represent ideal training grounds which can also provide the application and verification of ideas on sustainable development and use of renewable energy sources (e.g. sunlight, water, and wind power).

The expansion of Visitors' centres during the last few years depicts the general consumer society trend where natural and cultural resources are charged and completely exploited. The tourist offer diversity can have a positive reflection on the diversity of Visitors' Centre facilities and activities. Their multipurpose character contributes to the attracting users of

different profiles. The function and form authenticity is defined by a new and different manner of promoting natural and cultural heritage of rural areas to the modern society.

5. CONCLUSION

Visitors' centres represent an evolving model which redefines the existing knowledge on planning and design of vacation facilities and hotel structures by integrating different facilities (reception, information, education, accommodation, culture, services, recreation...) in a compact unit. The importance of establishment of facilities such as these is reflected primarily in the framework of presenting natural and cultural heritage to public, then in the economic, infrastructural and other forms of general rural areas. Tourism in seaside rural regions is not limited to simple rest, but includes active introduction into activities, nature, tradition, heritage, and other features differing from the city life. This is why the visitor centres can be characterized as a response to the process of global "tourist-mania" and the growing desire of the society to visit unknown and neglected spaces outside of the boundaries of urban centres.

The development of tourism activates and engages the wider context of an area, so that different (natural, cultural, industrial etc.) heritage factors can be integrated in the cognitive and interactive offer in the goal of the best possible promotion and presentation of new spaces in front of the public. Multipurpose role of Visitors' centres absorbs characteristics and authentic features of a site, which essentially determine its future purpose. Such principle enables development and planning of different activities encouraging different aspects of tourism (e.g. rural, village, medical, cultural, hunting, sports and recreation, educational wine-oenological, eco-tourism, ethno-tourism etc.)

Visitors' centres architecture is defined by a synergy of simplicity and rationality of form and capacity. The consistency of such a structure must possess a balance of psychological and physical phenomena, in order not to disrupt the natural environment's spatial assembly which actually generates and shapes it. Favouring traditional planning, design and construction principles can be unjustified, since it can lead to a complete slighting of rich cultural and historical values and deviation from modern society achievements.

The production of a new living culture and society development influence the establishment of different values of function and form. Cultural diversity, as one of the modern society characteristics, can impact the establishment of future facility features, in preference to modern uniformity and unified design. Architecture cannot survive in the modern society if it defines only basic construction principles. The necessity of sensation and creativity presents an important requirement in the process of designing multipurpose facilities, such as Visitors' centres. Educational dimension of these facilities establishes new modalities for construction of multipurpose structures aimed at preservation of natural and cultural identity of rural areas.

But still, development of Visitors' centres network, regardless of whether these are new or refurbished and adapted facilities, is still not the only and sufficient condition for renewal and activation of Serbian rural spaces. In the set of necessary actions, or steps to make, this is probably only the first but important requirement for the forming of a critical mass of positive energy, knowledge, desires and opportunities around these centres, needed in order to fundamentally change negative trends in the management and administration of rural spaces of Serbia which are rich with resources but poor from the aspect of ideas and willingness. The unification and defining of tourist areas would

represent a further crucial step, and it is important to note that it should not be reduced to another of many village categorizations or statistical atlases, but that it should be founded on the establishment of new micro-regions, irrespective of current administrative borders, which would be based on common natural and created values, traditions and mentality, and where we would form a network of tourist circles and routes; i.e. a set of possible tourist offers, which could have different forms, duration, activities and rhythm, and which could attract a wide circle of users by virtue of their diversity. Decentralization of rural area administration, as well as a set of other relevant state measures could engage enterprising companies and tourist agencies, which would activate the inert rural space by paying government taxes while simultaneously improving the social and economic situation in the rural regions of Serbia.

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VIZITORSKI CENTRI – NOVE KOORDINATE UNAPREĐENJA RURALNIH PODRUČJA SRBIJE

Vizitorski centri su obavezno informativno – promotivne, često uslužno – smeštajne, a ređe istraživačko - edukativne celine, koje svojim manjim ili većim skupom sadržaja treba da zadovolje različite potrebe određenog specifičnog prirodnog ili stvorenog područja. Veoma su bitni kao punktovi posebne namene, za razvoj mreže turističke ponude određenog šireg područja, ali i kao marketinško – promotivni markeri za popularizaciju i privlačnost, odnosno „novu prepoznatljivost“ pojedinih lokaliteta u užem prostornom smislu.

Kao moderni reperi, svojom funkcionalnošću i oblikovnom simbolikom mogu biti bitan generator razvoja i povećane posećenosti ruralnih područja, u kojima se specifični lokaliteti najčešće i nalaze. U radu se analiziraju ovi specifični funkcionalno – oblikovni sadržaji, sa gledišta mogućih tipoloških podela, iskustvenih obrazaca, odnosno sagledavanja potreba za pojedinim njihovim vidovima u ruralnim prostorima i arealima Srbije, a u zavisnosti od okruženja i doživljaja koje treba da predstavе korisnicima.

Кључне речи: *Vizitorski centri, ruralna područja, info - punktovi, staništa na putevima turizma.*