

AIRBNB RESHAPES HISTORIC CITIES

Airbnb is an online marketplace for arranging or offering lodging, primarily homestays, and tourism experiences. The company originates from San Francisco where two roommates, who could not afford their own rent, hosted short-term visitors on air mattresses to earn income. The offer matched the need as there were many visitors who were grateful for affordable lodging. The website Airbedandbreakfast.com was launched in 2008. In a relatively short period, the company that itself owns no rental premises has listed six million rooms, flats and houses in 81,000 cities across the globe. The initiative has responded to many social, cultural and economic expectations. The most popular areas for Airbnb are historic city centres; thus the additional income helps to maintain protected monuments and sites.

However, this initiative has turned into an incurable cancer. Airbnb is not the only of the kind. Also Booking.com and other online booking platforms are actively promoting home rentals. The extent of the problem is well reflected in the number of institutions and private initiatives fighting against sharing platforms.

Probably the biggest protest is boiling in the USA. For example, there are several Internet pages like insideairbnb.com or studies like Unfairbnb that collect and share data on the negative aspects of home rentals. Recently, ten European cities – Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Bordeaux, Brussels, Krakow, Munich, Paris, Valencia and Vienna – demanded more help from the EU in their battle against Airbnb and other holiday rental websites. Many local authorities are implementing or exploring regulations to mitigate the negative impact of short-term rentals.

The majority of these negative assessments concern the raise of rental prices for locals, the rapid decrease of local inhabitants in historic towns, even the accusation that Airbnb has become a racial gentrification tool, etc. However, the flourishing rental business is affecting not only the social, economic and ethical values, but also the valuable historic buildings and interiors. Airbnb's original temptation was to offer the opportunity to peep into local interiors and experience local character and intimacy instead of standardised hotel rooms. My own very first Airbnb took me to a home of restoration architects in the historic area of Bologna just after the ICOMOS General Assembly in Florence in 2014. This was a privilege I had not even dared to dream of. The admirable home had even more admirable hosts who shared with me their experience in different sites in Italy. However, since then I have stayed in the apartment where the host himself actually lived, only in a classy Art Nouveau building in Riga in Latvia.

Just within a few years, home rentals have changed from renting air mattresses or a free room to the rental of whole apartments, sometimes even houses. According to the data from insideairbnb.com the number of owners who rent out more than ten flats simultaneously is growing. There are operators who handle more than 100 apartments in one city. Even in the relatively small Tallinn Old Town in Estonia there are owners that rent out 30 apartments. This means that thousands of apartments in historic cities are bought up by investors, often of foreign origin, who renovate historic houses, with a focus on profitable solutions. This has led to an intensive renovation of apartments. The preservation of the interiors is a demanding challenge everywhere. It depends on national and local legislation how entire buildings are protected. For example, the ICOMOS Europe Group witnessed during their annual meeting in Porto/ Portugal in June 2019 how entire historic houses were demolished, leaving only the facades while the houses were newly built as rental apartments.

It is high time for all historic cities to study the situation on the rental market and its effect on cultural heritage. As these rentals operate on public websites and also as the mentioned critical studies are easily accessible, such a study would be relatively easy. These tendencies affect the policy of Historic Urban Landscapes as well as ICOMOS initiatives of Sustainable Development and Rights-based Approaches.



Fig. 1: Example of a provider of holiday apartments in the old town of Porto, Portugal (photo J. Haspel/ICOMOS.DE)



Figs. 2 and 3: In the old town of Porto many half-decayed houses are luxuriously renovated and offered as holiday apartments (photos J. Haspel/ICOMOS.DE)

References

Airbnb in NYC: The Real Numbers Behind the Sharing Story
<https://skift.com/2014/02/13/airbnb-in-nyc-the-real-numbers-behind-the-sharing-story/>
How Airbnb took over the world
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/may/05/airbnb-homelessness-renting-housing-accommodation-social-policy-cities-travel-leisure>

Inside Airbnb insideairbnb.com
Ten cities ask EU for help to fight Airbnb expansion https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jun/20/ten-cities-ask-eu-for-help-to-fight-airbnb-expansion?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail
Unfairbnb <https://corporateurope.org/sites/default/files/unfairbnb.pdf>