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## Destination Design: A Design Thinking Approach to Tourism Development Through the Evolution of Destination Management Organizations

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**2023 TTRA Canada Abstract Template:**  
**Destination Design: A design thinking approach to tourism development through the evolution of Destination Management Organizations**

## **Introduction**

The development of tourist destinations is a complex process involving numerous stakeholders. However, this system is facing the need for innovation as technological advancements and the experience economy create new opportunities for communities while challenging the roles of legacy institutions. The study adopts a systems-level approach to understanding current destination development practices.

This research emphasizes the critical role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) as pivotal actors in facilitating information exchange among stakeholders, while also shedding light on their diminishing relevance, attributed to emerging trends, technological changes, and challenges in managing increasingly intricate relationships.

To address this issue, this study explores the concept of destination design, an emerging approach that applies design thinking to creatively address challenges in tourism and destination development. Destination design draws inspiration from contemporary design thinking, a problem-solving approach that seeks to understand users, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems (Erschbamer, 2021).

The objective of this research is to explore the potential for DMOs to transform from managers of destinations to becoming designers of destinations. By adopting this transformative role, DMOs can regain relevance by assisting stakeholders in breaking away from conventional knowledge structures and embracing a transdisciplinary approach to destination development.

The results of this research include a proposed Destination Design Methodology. This suite of tools, including processes and workshops, aims to support tourism practitioners in creatively addressing challenges, enhancing destination competitiveness, and establishing new Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that extend beyond growth and volume.

## **Literature Review**

To ground our research of destination design, we conducted a literature review of works rooted in the fields of tourism, destination development, and other disciplines (such as the experience economy). We took this approach to help us gain a deeper understanding of the current research in destination development and other related disciplines, which helped inform a transdisciplinary perspective of the need for design thinking within destination development. A complete list of readings can be found on pg. 55 of the paper.

## **Methodology**

**Practitioner Interviews** - To broaden our understanding of destination development and the key players from across disciplines, we interviewed five practitioners representing a wide spectrum of stakeholders in tourism. The interviews were conducted by phone or video, due to COVID-19 restrictions. We used a semi-structured format to gather consistent data from each participant, while also leaving space for open-ended discussion. Through the open-ended portion of the interviews, we were able to uncover insightful ways to frame destination design through the

lenses of stakeholders who have traditionally existed outside of the scope of standard destination development approaches.

Sensemaking and Analysis - With an understanding of the research into destination development and related fields and a compilation of practitioner interview data, we turned to the process of sensemaking. Through this process, our aim was to identify the areas where design thinking tools and methodologies would be helpful to destination development practitioners, while moving towards the goals of a transdisciplinary approach. Using tools from the System Design Toolkit (Systemic Design Toolkit, 2016), we moved from simply understanding the system of destination development towards defining a desirable future and creating the space for the innovative approach of destination design.

## **Results**

The proposed Destination Design Methodology provides a framework for the strategies destination design could offer communities, in order to help them adapt to the factors that are challenging the existing destination development system. The methodology is intended to help DMOs transition through the Triangle of Change and become designers of destinations, as opposed to managers. The DMO as a designer works alongside community partners in order to understand the needs of stakeholders, develop a strategy, prototype solutions, and evaluate the results. Much like Google Ventures' Design Sprint process (Knapp et al. 2016), the Destination Design method uses prototyping and user feedback to inform next steps. Instead of relying on ten-year strategic plans, this method moves DMOs into the role of facilitating short-term tests which compound into long-term success.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This research and proposal is only a first step towards a transdisciplinary approach to tourism. Through our research question, we set out to help communities create resilient destinations by utilizing design thinking and co-creation methodologies that consider the needs of all stakeholders. The following recommendations outline areas to further develop and strengthen this research and design proposal:

- Testing the methodology: Making this project and proposal publicly available may allow for more extensive and independent testing of the Destination Design Methodology
- This research was conducted during COVID-19 restrictions, which was highly impactful to the tourism sector. Therefore, further work should be done once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted to test the methodology and toolkit in communities.
- An international perspective: This research focused on the North American tourism and destination development markets and structures. Utilizing the same design thinking methodology, further research should be done to address how it may apply in different locations and contexts around the world.
- Research into disruptive innovation: This research looked to help DMOs adapt their model to meet rapid changes due to innovation in the tourism space. Further research should explore how disruptive innovation may successfully challenge or potentially replace DMOs. Disruptive innovation could replace the existing system by providing value to stakeholders in new ways.