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Extended Abstract

This research presents a review and analysis of a Dark Tourism attraction, the KGB “Corner House” in Riga, Latvia. Dark tourism, as stated by Stone and Sharpley (2008), examines tourism, and the related visiting of “sites, attractions or events linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster” (pg. 574). The field of Dark Tourism continues to receive a great deal of interest in the area of tourism education and scholarship (White and Frew, 2013; Dalton, 2014). Both academic and industry research continues to explore questions as to both the supply and demand for sites and attractions that relate to death (Farmaki, 2013). This study, by way of participatory research, examines the “Corner House”, the former site of the KGB office in Riga, which captures both the darkest and lighter aspects of Dark Tourism.

Riga, the capital of Latvia, represents one of the oldest and most beautiful port cities in Europe. Riga is renowned as the home of some of the most stunning examples of art nouveau architecture in Eastern Europe, but it is one specific piece of architecture that represents the darkest period of Riga’s history. The six-story building at the intersection of Brivibas, and Stabu Streets (figure 1), has had an infamous past. Built as a site for apartments and retail shops in 1912, in 1940 with Latvia’s forced incorporation into the Soviet Union, it began its notorious reign as the home for the secret Soviet police, or KGB. Although the KGB left in 1991, with Latvia’s return to independence, it was only on May 1st 2014 that it was reopened as an attraction as part of Riga’s role as the 2014 European Capital of Culture.

What makes “Corner House” of interest to Dark Tourism research is the fact that it can be mapped onto Stone’s (2006) spectrum of Dark Tourism at both the “Dark” and the “Light” extremes. The “Corner House” would fall into the darkest side of the spectrum as it represents an actual site where death and suffering occurred. It further maps to this end of the scale due to its political and historical role in the preservation and education of Latvia’s Soviet era past. The “Darkness” of the site is also strengthened by the fact that many of the rooms are preserved as they looked during its time of use, therefore enhancing the authenticity of the site (Stone, 2006).

In contrast to most “Dark” sites, the “Corner House” can also be classified onto the “Lighter” side of the spectrum as well. The commercialization of such a site by way of providing visitor entertainment exists. The level of authenticity is somewhat diminished by showing a video depicting executions that did not occur on the site, as well as creating a modern art interpretation of the dark past (see below). The marketing of the attraction is also interpreted from a purposeful supply perspective, i.e. the site was advertised and admission was charged (Stone, 2006). The next section provides additional details of the specific workings of the site.

The “Dark”

The “Corner House”, which acquired this name as during the Soviet period people feared to talk openly about the KGB, was the site of imprisonment, torture and execution. The author

had the opportunity to visit the museum during the first week of its opening, and was told by the local guide that approximately 3,000 had already come to see the exhibit. Each visitor who visits the site was given a “ticket”, which was a copy of the identification cards that were issued to those taken into the house by the KGB. Once you receive your ticket, you will notice a small box with a slot on the way in, which appears to be used to accept donations (as there was no charge to visit the main floor exhibits). When asked what the typical amount was for donation, the guide stated that box was “not for donations, but was a common item during Soviet times, where you could anonymously deposit the name of those people you wanted to inform on as enemies of the state”.

The site itself consists of walking by Soviet era posters and propaganda, and then entering the main floor room, which takes the visitor through the history of the building, and the role of the KGB in Latvia. The descriptions on the posters are written in Latvian, English and Russian (through forced emigration during the Soviet period Latvia’s population is approximately 30% ethnic Russian, with the percentage in Riga almost 50% – something that has recently raised ominous concerns in Latvia because Russia shares their eastern border).

The building itself had not gone through much in the way of renovations prior to its reopening, with cracked walls and peeling or missing paint adding to the darkness of the visit. The last room on the main floor exhibit was the execution room. The room is small, empty, and dark. This represents the most disturbing part of the visit. This sense of unease for visitors was highlighted by the pictures in the room, and the constant running of a scene from a film realistically depicting the process in which people were brought to a chamber such as this for execution.

The “Light”

After visiting the main floor, there was a secondary component to the attraction. For an admission of 5 Euros visitors can walk to the upper floors of the building where one can see the small, former prisoner cells, which were now repurposed as display galleries for some very interesting modern art. The exhibits consist of mixed format art depicting the horror and tragedies that occurred in Latvia during the Soviet period. Examples include methods of torture, disturbingly displayed on what looked like “commemorative plates” neatly hanging on a wall (figure 2), and a display called the Latvian “suitcase” which provides visitors with a sense of what Latvians could, and could not, take with them as they fled from Soviet oppression.

Although there exists similar museums housed in former KGB locations in the other two Baltic nations, Estonia and Lithuania, the one in Riga proves to be more difficult to visit. This could be attributed to the lack of graphic photographs compared to the other KGB museums, or the limited amount of actual artefacts, that results in the site forcing the visitor to create their own images and thoughts of what it must have been like to live through this period. As authenticity has been demonstrated to be a key feature in the creation of “darker” sites (Chhabra, 2014), the level of authenticity generally relates to the degree that the dark tourism sites relates to the actual sites and materials of death, tragedy, and the macabre, the Corner House focused on heightening one’s sense of apprehension and

anxiety, and a number of “shudder” moments during the visit, more closely related to the “horror house” (Sharpley, 2009) aspects of dark tourism.

Discussion

What then has been the contribution of the Corner House to the growing field of dark tourism? On the one hand it represents a continuation of the development of dark tourism sites that are housed in the actual location where dark events have occurred. On the other hand, although the degree of authenticity of a dark tourism site can be strong due to it being the actual site, it represents an example where additional factors, both overt, and implied, can add to the degree of darkness. Furthermore the creation and inclusion of “dark art” (Biber, 2009) by way of artistic works that relate to, or build upon the darkness of the site represents a novel way to segment a dark tourism site from those of similar nature. Although it was unclear if this was the intention behind the separate, but related exhibits in the Corner House, it does indicate that the level of competition for visitors to their dark sites will continue.

In brief, the Corner House would be considered an atypical attraction within official programs of celebration in a calendar of sites for a European Capital of Culture. What the Corner House does demonstrate, at least in the case of Latvia in general, and Riga specifically, is that there continues to be a desire to ensure that both people in Latvia, and those visitors to Riga, learn more the dark past of the Soviet period. Future research could include other examples of both the theoretical and practical aspects of the continued development of dark tourism sites, but also that the future of dark tourism may begin to mirror that of other more established tourism genres. There will be a need to constantly seek out a greater variety of exhibits and attractions, and no longer rely solely on the “darkness” of the site.

Future study of these types of “Dark and Light” sites can help to further support Stone’s Dark tourism spectrum (2006) while also providing an opportunity to better understand the positive and negative nature of such attractions. Questions that remain to be answered include how a Dark Tourism site of a mixed nature can still achieve the aims of both sides of the Dark Tourism spectrum. In other words, is it possible, or even should a single Dark Tourism site attempt or succeed at providing historic preservation and education, while at the same time being a commercial and entertainment success? An accumulation of these types of reviews and analysis of Dark Tourism attractions can assist in this goal.

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Figures

Figure 1 – "Corner House" (Photo: Author)



Figure 2 – "Commemorative Torture Plate" (Photo: Author)

