



# **FUN FACTORS IN DESTINATIONS, DRAWN FROM HAPPINESS RESEARCH**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**Design of people-places is central to architecture. Around the world, valued places are set apart as destinations, places worth going to when seeking relaxation or pleasure. Although there are many individual motives for travel to special places, according to tourism researchers, it is asserted here that the attributes that make destinations effective can be understood by designers, who influence them. It is the purpose of this paper to outline basic parameters of destination design.**

**Quality of life research is referenced as a basis for understanding human happiness and how environment can affect QOL. It is proposed that designers can influence individual and community quality of life through the understanding of critical attributes. The attributes that specifically contribute to enjoyable destination experience are referred to here as “fun factors.”**

## **HAPPINESS RESEARCH DESIGN IMPLICATIONS**

**The search for happiness or satisfaction in life is a valuable study subject for people. The International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies, ISQOLS, is an international network of professionals that seeks to coordinate research in this field. The creation of greater happiness for more people is regarded as a worthwhile and achievable goal by social scientists (Veenhoven, 1997). How this can be done has been the central issue for a variety of social policies: it has been proposed that the elimination of poverty, illness and ignorance would lead to greater quality of life.**

**In parallel thought, the experience of enjoyment or fun in one’s life has high value for individuals. The supposition that more joy or fun can be encouraged by particular action in people’s lives has implications for leisure, work and the design of people-places. Designers from Vitruvius to Michael Graves have trusted in the logic that better-designed spaces could lead to happier (more satisfied), healthier people. Travel destinations have**

**historically held the promise of surroundings and experiences that will uplift the visitor, typically full of fun and pleasure. What are the characteristics of the destination that make this possibility believable? Are there identifiable elements that can be found in the physical landscape of places that make them capable of providing fun for the travel public?**

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

**Quality of life has received a great deal of attention in the decades since many of the social ills have been reduced in the Western World. Happiness is considered one of the contributors to good quality of life; if a community has happy citizens, their quality of life is viewed as generally good (Veenhoven, 1997). A parallel correlation is theorized to exist in destinations: enjoyable experiences are evident in effective tourist destinations. Stated more clearly, a place that is not fun for visitors will fail as a tourist destination.**

**When investigating happiness, QOL researchers have followed some lines of reasoning that could be traced for the purposes of understanding successful destinations. The question of whether all people are equally happy is posed; if everyone is happy, then nothing needs to be done to improve their situation. The very basis for competition among destinations in the travel industry is that there are “better” attributes to be found in one place than another. The thrust of travel for leisure purposes depends on the notion that some place other than a person’s home surroundings has the capacity to enrich one’s life, provide new insight or create memorable experiences.**

**To be meaningful, the terms of fun and happiness must be accepted as legitimate by many people. Happiness is used by sociologists and psychologists as a state of mind in individuals that reflects a “stable appreciation of life” (Veenhoven, 1997). Formal surveys of people began in the 1960’s and continue to the present, to reveal levels of general satisfaction with life.**

**Likewise, surveys of travelers have led, in at least one instance, to lists of attributes that contribute to satisfaction with vacation experiences (Mansfeld, 1992). Although the word “fun” was not specifically framed in the questions posed to travelers, the meaning of “fun factors” could not be overlooked by intelligent reviewers of this study. In a recent survey of Americans, for the fourth year in a row, the number one goal of individuals for their lives was “to have more fun” (Miller, 2002).**

## **DEFINITIONS**

**When describing the basis for understanding happiness, Ruut Veenhoven, Erasmus University Rotterdam and University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, revealed that “quality-of-life research tries to define what a good life is and how well reality meets these standards.” He defined happiness as “a stable appreciation of life,” but pointed out that laymen use the term more broadly.**

**As with “happiness” research the search for “fun factors” may suffer from problems of definition, but once some basic guidelines have been delineated, the researcher should find fertile ground for study. It is proposed that certain factors, or conditions, exist that contribute to the ability of individuals to enjoy their environment, or experience fun. Admittedly, the concept is new, and many details have yet to be clarified. However, for the purposes of this paper, a parallel line of thought is viewed to exist between happiness research and destination research.**

**If “fun factors” or some other identifiable attributes do not exist, then the reasons for traveling to different places cannot be objectively determined. The tourist industry could be said to be as mysterious as the world was to people before the development of basic scientific principles. Sir Isaac Newton postulated that a force called gravity caused objects to fall; that they did not fall “just because” or due to some mystical “desire”**

**to fall. Similarly, tourism researchers recognize that while decisions people make are not subject to formulated, systematic equations, the factors that influence them can be identified.**

**Happiness is internal, but can be recognized by individuals in themselves. People regard themselves as “happy” when they are satisfied with, or like their lives. Happiness is a personal evaluation, and cannot be known by others, unless questions about this self-awareness are carefully-framed and honestly-answered. In the study of human response to destinations, a designer considers the positive experiences that might be enjoyed there, and fun, as a determinant of design success, begins to stand out as a central theme. When the “fun factors” of a place are analyzed, the possibility of understanding its potential for success as a destination can be gauged.**

## **BASELINE**

**Generally, people are happy when certain basic requirements for life are met. These “essentials” are present when people have reached beyond a level of subsistence. When sociologists talk of happiness, they often substitute the phrase “life-satisfaction” to emphasize the subjective nature of the concept. Not all equally-advantaged individuals will view their status as “happy” to the same degree (Veenhoven, 1997).**

**In a study of travelers, Mansfeld (1992) revealed some similar results. For any tourist, a certain level of travel expectation must be met; this varies, of course, among groups of people, according to income, education, and several other parameters. Likewise, travelers are satisfied with their travel experiences when their expectations are met. This “travel-satisfaction” could be re-named as “tourist happiness” or “fun” since one of the central goals of most travel is fun, or enjoyment.**

**A common difficulty of both happiness studies and fun studies is the evaluation by individuals of their experiences, whether life in**

**general (happiness) or vacations, specifically (fun). Some persons are more apt to exaggerate their positive or negative experiences; plus, societal and other pressures can influence honest expression of reflections on these experiences. So researchers in both arenas are faced with inconsistencies in their respondents. However, some general trends can be derived.**

## **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

**Most people enjoy life unless they are living at subsistence levels, as in Third World countries. Although very adaptable, people recognize they are miserable when living in poor conditions (Veenhoven, 1997). Beyond the basic meeting of critical livability, what determinants have been identified for creating happiness? A flow of life experiences, modified by genetic disposition, quality of one's society, and self-evaluation work together to create an individual's perception of personal happiness (Leung, 2002).**

**Destination designers could take the previous pattern of happiness-determination and generalize that satisfaction with travel experiences is the result of trip flow, heredity, social circumstances, and personal reflection. Where can designers influence this pattern? In the physical environment of the destination, in the experience of moments in the travel flow, architects can maximize the potential for positive and minimize the possibility for negative.**

**From the perspective of this investigator, effective destinations apparently recognize that fun should be planned for in travel destinations. When a place purposefully invites visitors to experience their destination, they typically advertise through a variety of media the attributes considered desirable by leisure travelers. When the wide array of brochures and other ads were examined by this investigator, common themes included beauty, fun, memorable experiences, and variety or choice of activities.**

**An interesting aspect of both life happiness and travel satisfaction is that people do not always know why they are satisfied; if pressed for specific reasons of happiness, individuals may not have adequate answers. This is obviously where the sociologists and architects need to be focusing their attention. When the reverse of happiness is analyzed, the lack of something is easy to trace. In the travel industry, the absence of critical elements in the visitor's vacation experience leads clearly to dissatisfaction. Perhaps by working backwards through negative experiences researchers can uncover essential ingredients for effective destinations.**

## **CORRELATES**

**Some happiness correlates (conditions statistically-significant in surveys of individuals over years of happiness research) were found (Veenhoven, 1997) in the following attributes: absence of poverty, freedom from fear and prejudice, ability to control one's own destiny, general mental and physical health, value of individualism and education, belief in God, and participation in a modern society. There are, of course, exceptions to these trends, and not all population groups have been studied at this time. However, just acting on what is known currently might be a reasonable course for designers. Although few architects would get involved with the intricate details of some of these factors, the principles at the heart of them should be considered as important by designers.**

**Taking the notion of good mental and physical health, for instance, we realize that a considerable part of design for any space is postulated on the argument that architects can and should create spaces that are healthy for their users. Legal statutes are posed on just such a contention. For the destination architect, the challenge is raised to create spaces that are not only healthy, but will go beyond the basic "meeting of needs" to a new level of "uplifting the spirit" of users. Leisure time is highly valued by mankind, and the places that are designed to**

**accommodate leisure pursuits must meet a very high standard of expectation.**

**Another parameter that is often assigned directly to the architect is the matter of fear. The manner in which a space is arranged has tremendous potential for alleviating the anxieties of users. Destination designers must always consider the implications for safety of visitors and residents in the design of destinations. If a place is not safe, or endangers people, few people would consider it a fun and entertaining destination. However, there is some attraction for the “teasing” of imagined danger for some tourists. Further, the reality of danger is part of the “thrill” aspect of certain destinations; but the participant must be aware of the risks and enjoy the challenge of facing them. A delicate balance must be achieved in design of these sorts of destinations.**

**In the realm of control over one’s environment, the architect can create spaces that maximize the opportunity for personal customizing of the experience. This is especially true for destination design, where the user is given several options for shaping the space, a variety of possible configurations, and a wide array of activity choices. One of the highest ratings for tourist satisfaction for a destination has to do with individual control over the experience flow (Mansfeld, 1992).**

**In summary, the following baseline “fun factors” can be extrapolated from happiness research: personal control of space in destination environments, management of fear, provision of physically and mentally healthy surroundings, opportunity for enlightenment and education, and equal treatment of persons. To be fun for all (both host and visitor) a destination will be sensitive to the needs and wants of all participants; but the resolution of needs and wants by a designer does not necessarily imply the solution of “fun factor” criteria. Further research is essential for understanding of the effects of “fun factors” on visitors and how these can be beneficially utilized in a design.**

**QUALITY OF LIFE THEORY AND APPLICATION**

**When considering individual quality of life, Kwok-fai Leung (2002) outlined one strategy for improving QOL: reducing undesirable determinants and increasing desirable determinants. Negative factors are those which will lead to lower QOL when they are present, but will not lead to high QOL when they are resolved. For example, poverty and ill health reduce QOL, but wealth and wellness do not necessarily result in higher QOL.**

**Positive factors are those which can be lacking, but do not automatically reflect lower QOL. The presence of these desirable determinants can promote higher QOL: social skills, family support network, leisure and cultural activities. Years ago, a song with the following phrase really summed up the principle of the approach described by Leung: “Accentuate the positive...eliminate the negative...”**

**A system model for understanding QOL was published in the recent issue of the ISQOLS newsletter cited above. The assumed role of environment in shaping QOL is visually expressed with a graphic included by Leung in the article. Through feedback, individuals consciously or subconsciously strive to experience “more rewarding and gratifying human-environment interaction” (Leung, 2002). Designers can facilitate this search by thoughtfully building into people-places opportunities for positive experiences, and reducing negative ones.**

## **TRAVEL SATISFACTION ATTRIBUTES**

**Many studies have been conducted by tourism researchers in an attempt to better understand tourist behavior and what motivates people to travel. Two broad categories of investigation are typically considered to interact: the demand side, and the supply side. The general theory regarding supply of the tourist product is that there are attributes that have drawing power for visitors. Understanding which of the two categories drives the tourism “engine” is rather similar to the old question:**

**“Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” If there was zero demand, would there be no supply of tourist product? Similarly, if no supply existed, would there be an absence of demand for destinations?**

**Whether one believes in “supply-side” or “demand-driven” tourist behavior, the facts remain that some patterns have been observed. In destinations, in general, the following six categories of attributes were cited by Mansfeld (1992) as important to travelers to some degree in trip-satisfaction: spatial, physical, level of service, economic, activity and socio-cultural. Specific attributes he listed were examined by this investigator to find those that designers (landscape architects) might influence:**

- **different and unfamiliar landscapes**
- **physical environment provides feeling of escape from routine of everyday life**
- **maintain originality in terms of physical and cultural environment**
- **attractions close enough to one another to allow multiple activity**
- **transportation within destination: cheap and frequent**
- **proximity to other tourist amenities**
- **opportunity for relaxation**
- **opportunity for sport: infrastructure and facilities**
- **individual tourism**

**Destination designers should also recognize that the following attributes were also identified by Mansfeld (1992) as contributing to tourist satisfaction. Although somewhat beyond the realm of landscape architects to control, these factors highlight the need for programs or other mechanisms to encourage particular action:**

- **good value of services**
- **available activities not available at visitor’s home**
- **host population with decent and welcoming attitude**
- **possibility of purchasing cultural symbols**
- **background information on current activities/events**

- security problems and political situations not likely
- tourist saturation/overcrowding not a problem
- weather conform to pre-planned activities
- facilities to entertain children
- desired level and type of accommodation
- shopping facilities
- possible encounters with host population (formal & informal)
- good food and drinks
- variety of day-time activities (at site & surroundings)
- possible meeting other tourists, socially
- inexpensive travel costs

**Designers should realize, of course, that some of these attributes are more important to some travelers, and that priority for factors change over a person's life. For instance, cost is the primary consideration for many young single tourists; later in life, facilities to entertain children may become critically important as that same person travels with his or her family.**

## **GAPS**

**Research in tourist satisfaction has led to identification of three "stretches" or gaps, very similar to the gaps identified in quality of life research (Veenhoven, 1997; Mansfeld, 1992). In both realms, there is the concept of an ideal or preferred world of conditions; a middle world of expectation, or recent reality; and a baseline of tolerance or minimal conditions. The difference between any two of these levels of value reveal a gap that can be measured and then compared with other gaps.**

**Individuals are satisfied when their most recent experience is better than their minimum expectations for a destination. They are reconciled to something less than their "ideal" level of preference. Wide margins of difference can exist between tolerated and preferred levels of travel experience.**

**Most everyone realizes that while it is fine to hope for high levels of service and destination experience, the reality is that those “ideal” levels will rarely be achieved. Travelers also recognize that when certain attributes are given priority, other attributes will necessarily be limited; therefore, the “must-have” attributes will result in travelers being less picky in other factors. Satisfaction can rise when minimal expectations are not only met, but when the travel experience begins to approach ideal levels of preference.**

## **SUMMARY**

**By recognizing and managing positive and negative attributes in people’s physical environments, designers can influence individual and community quality of life. Designers should continually update their understanding of happiness, and seek new ways of shaping places for leisure that maximize positive experience.**

**Some currently-understood means of assigning value to physical attributes in destinations have been outlined here. Tourist-satisfaction or fun has much to do with how well a place meets visitor expectations and then exceeds them, approaching an ideal state.**

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