



The Great Dispersion

As the travel market becomes guided by experience and authenticity, a contender emerges following a long gestation to challenge the traditional hotel model.

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Set atop a pine-covered hillside looking over Thimpu – the capital city of Bhutan – the country's first Six Senses property appears initially to be business as usual for the wellness-focused group, but there is something different about this project.

Drive two hours south-west, swapping the forest lodge for a farmhouse and a valley of stepped rice paddies in Punakha, and you will still technically find yourself within the same hotel. The same goes for 200km west, and a plot skirting the ancient temples of Bumthang, where a modernist take on the district's traditional wooden huts unfold amidst the firs. And so too in the mountains of Paro, where Six Senses Bhutan looks across a serene meadow, inspired by the Buddhist monasteries dotting cliffs nearby.

In total, there are five separate properties that fall under this hotel's banner; The Master Lodge in Thimpu, and a circuit of four structures dispersed across much of the country's west and central valleys. Each offers guests a different experience, from dining in the ruins of dormant temples to excursions in the remote Himalayan foothills, with a series of distinct designs to match. The Punakha element, for example, is rustic and styled around agriculture references, whilst Thimpu draws from the white walls and shingle roofs of the capital's architecture.

As such, guests can choose from five different locations, five different styles, and five different

stays; a valuable asset(s) in the era of personalised travel. Alone they offer individual snapshots of their respective corner of the country, though when considered together, the completed circuit offers guests an experience few others can.

In terms of scope, Six Senses Bhutan is the largest project of its kind, spread about an entire nation, but it is far from the first. Falling under the banner of the dispersed hotel – a model that sees the traditional all-in-one offer broken up and scattered strategically around a chosen area – the ambitiously realised property could perhaps be viewed as the concept's breakthrough moment, channeling the notion for the luxury crowd as it enters the branded mainstream. Whilst the ambition is clear, this project remains one of the looser interpretations of a bonafide movement that has both clear ideas of execution, operation and values, as well as its own story to tell.

THE ORIGINAL

Back in the early 1980s, Giancarlo Dall'Ara was a young tourism consultant working with hotels along Italy's Adriatic coast as the country began a period of economic revival. Called to the north, he found few hotels to work with amidst the region's clustered towns and villages, busy with traditional housing and tangible history. Following earthquakes in the region, some even stood empty, or otherwise on the edge. With his team, Dall'Ara applied his knowledge



Albergo Diffuso emerged in rural Italy, and saw historic buildings transformed into connected, immersive hospitality experiences

of the hotel market to this landscape, with the intention of creating a model that would aid in the recovery of these towns whilst eschewing established elements of a hospitality system that might potentially disrupt the local fabric.

As opposed to the hotel anchoring the village, the village would anchor the hotel; its components spread across existing structures – mainly houses – in a clean break from the stacked guestrooms template. The properties would operate under a single owner to provide a sense of continuity, with the experience characterised by immersion and authenticity. Thus, in the town of Maranzanis, in the mountainous Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, Albergo Diffuso was born.

“We began to train young people with a view to the village’s touristic recovery,” Dall’Ara explains. “The idea came from a mix of my experience with hotels and the utilisation of houses for tourism, and this gave me the spark; a model of hospitality comprising houses, but one that also guarantees all the services of a hotel – from the reception, to the hall, to the room service. I immediately became aware of the concept’s potential, but I then took many years to define the standards necessary for its economic feasibility.”

There is an inherent relationship between Albergo Diffuso and recovery – the model was born as a means to encourage guests away from cities and into the less-visited rural cultures, with the intriguing lure of a stay that would see them become temporary residents of a close-knit community. The typical kit of parts included a series of guestrooms occupying lightly converted houses, a central lobby area with food available, and somewhere to interact with locals beyond those under the hotel’s employment. This simple, adaptable approach would see it endlessly tweaked and reworked to suit the varied layouts of towns planned long before hotels were mainstays, with authentic realism both its by-product and ace card.

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or the tourist itinerary. They want to live the lifestyle of the place, and they want to immerse themselves into the local culture,” Dall’Ara continues. “For this reason, there must be continuity between the Albergo Diffuso and the village. The intention is to have two halls; one inside of the hotel, another in the piazza – or on the street where they can find the houses – and somewhere they can meet the locals. These conditions can be found in a village, but not often in the city. There must not be a separation, but a permeability between the Albergo Diffuso and the land.”

Today, there are over 40 such dispersed hotels operating in Italy, with more in the works, and Albergo Diffuso is now an official national association working to promote the concept. Properties in historic Monopoli on the southern coast, the town of Cabras on westernmost Sicily and Campagnatico – a commune in the Tuscan Province of Grosseto – all subscribe to the methods laid out, and by extension so too

their surrounding communities; the latter’s participation and acceptance of the model key to its success.

More recently, Poreč, a resort town on Croatia’s Istrian Peninsula became a convert, and the Locarno municipality of Corippo – a rocky outcrop of historic Ticino Granite blocks with slate roofing on the Swiss/Italian border – expressed interest too, both with sights set on the sort of revival this model was conceived to serve. But more on that later.

THE NEW WAVE

Though the concept was born in rural Italy, recent years have seen it stretch its wings and make inroads in different locales whilst retaining some of the core touchstones. In this sense, we can look to Asia for the contemporary take, where the dispersed model has been adopted by a pair of acclaimed openings.

Whilst over 15 square miles of Tokyo were destroyed during World War II, and Japan’s place on the continental plate lines has seen the capital hit by regular earthquakes, pockets of history can nonetheless be found in the city’s Shitamachi neighbourhoods – the traditional name for a cluster of wards along the Sumida River. The Yanaka neighbourhood in Taitō is one such district, largely untouched by the destruction that levelled similar areas, and thus with much of its original low-lying 19th and 20th century architecture still intact. So too elements of its culture – the slower pace of life at odds with the hypermodern bustle over in the centre.

The temple town’s winding streets are lined with two-storey wooden homes and shopfronts, and lead between cemeteries and shrines dating back to the 1600s. Favoured by craftsmen, artists, flea marketeers and a large feline population, the neighbourhood’s comparatively reasonable rent levels ensure a healthy mix of multi-generation locals, professionals and tourists, whilst civil society groups have fought hard to preserve the traditional streetscape. And though many of these structures now house cafés, galleries and other hallmarks of gentrification, the tone is decidedly authentic.

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UCHIDA DESIGN

Yanaka might have been spared from the severe economic decline experienced by the rural Italian towns where the dispersed concept took root, but the two locales share some notable characteristics. This is most obvious in the dense knit of historic residential architecture, but also in a wider commitment to communal and structural preservation, as well as resistance to the construction of newbuilds. Moreover, both have been forced to adapt to serve a tourist clientele seeking a level of authenticity perhaps beyond the capabilities of a traditional model.

Occupying spots in Yanaka, as well as structures in the strips of Nezu and Sendagi either side – this trio of similarly storied districts forming the larger Yanesen area – the Hagi Studio-designed Hanare was conceived under the notion that ‘the whole town can be your hotel’. The property’s five ryokan-style guestrooms are set in renovated houses at the quiet intersection of two inconspicuous streets; the pool is a local Sento bathhouse that guests share with locals; the souvenir shop is a run of local businesses operating on the area’s marketplace; and a branch of TokyoBike provides rentals from the main thoroughfare for guests to explore the town.

All of this orbits Hagiso, a cultural centre, café, gallery and architecture studio with a check-in and reception upstairs. Guestrooms share a bathroom, encouraging visitors to venture out and experience the traditional communal bathing, whilst the limited cafe menu and in-room breakfasts turn attention to the vibrant mix of stalls, fine or fast dining and informal izakayas that guests will naturally come across as they move between facilities.

It may not be at the heart of the area’s revival, but Hanare has nonetheless recognised the original model’s capabilities in the experiential sense, and applied these elements to both preserve and showcase authentic culture, whilst

simultaneously affording a user-designed stay for guests increasingly driven by mass customisation and the demand for sustainable, personalised experiences.

THE BIG PICTURE

Looking several major cities south and as many points up the market scale, we can see an early indicator of what the dispersed concept might look like once it inevitably moves into the luxury boutique segment. Created by Uchida Design, The General Kyoto – formerly Enso Ango – adheres to similar framework, but raises the stakes with guestrooms at each of its five facilities, a more curated system compared to the thrilling, let-them-loose spontaneity of Hanare. Scattered throughout urban Kyoto’s Shimogyo Ward is an arts and crafts space, a Japanese teahouse with an event space, a gallery and guest kitchen, a restaurant terrace and bar, and a compact short-stay bunkhouse.

“Making use of the dispersed style, we aimed to create designs that would complement the function of each building, to generate encounters, experiences and information of the living city – allowing guests to stay like they live there,” the team at Uchida Design comments. “With each building having its own facilities as well as a degree of individualisation, the balance of function as an element of a whole hotel has been dispersed too, creating the motivation for guests to travel around and visit each.”

Working with the studio at each facility were a broader cast of contributors including designers, artists, craftspeople, fashion designers, landscapers and calligraphers, with the intention to bring as varied a perspective of the local fabric as possible to proceedings. The arts and crafts space features work by ceramic artist Masanobu Ando; the gallery and guest kitchen orbits the aesthetic of visual artist Katsuhiko Hibino – the entire building

decorated with cuisine-themed cardboard murals; clothing artist and Galerie Momogusa co-owner Akido Ando is behind the chic uniform; and the paper miniatures of architect Naoki Terada find a fitting home in the small-scale guesthouse.

This collaborative approach is a smart decision in the context of the form – if the whole town is now your hotel, then it makes sense that the scope of perspective should be much wider than a few individuals.

“The hotel responds to the different neighbourhoods by way of inviting local artisans or specialists to provide their know-how – such as Japanese traditional cooking, Japanese crafts or Zazen meditation by a Buddhist monk, which creates a strong connection between guests and the local community, and a place closely linked to the inheritance of local culture and lifestyle,” the studio adds. “Instead of adopting the showy architectural design of commercial facilities, the design blends in well with the old rows of houses in Kyoto and has led to the property gaining the trust and favourable impression of the local community.”

The General Kyoto may be hyperlocal in terms of guest experience, and the physical movement between each space, but there is a global outlook in the project too – Swiss practice Atelier Oi designed the restaurant portion, whilst Paris-based art director Philippe Galowich has handled the varied project’s coherent visual identity. In a world where more people than ever are travelling, relocating or passing through, the definition of locality is blurring, and the catalogue of design ideas on show here speaks to the international perspective of many emergent or evolving movements.

At its core, however, the dispersed hotel is a concept tethered to community, and as the idea of community shifts in line with the rise of social media, globalisation and increased



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Occupying spots in Tokyo's Yanaka district, as well as structures in Nezu and Sendagi, Hanare was conceived under the notion that 'the whole town can be your hotel'

international awareness, it could prove better placed to fluidly adapt than the current model of consolidated experience. With this in mind, Six Senses Bhutan resembles something of a great experiment in the concept's bigger picture – the plot of structures on the country's central valley a testing ground for an ambitious next chapter that sees our hero taking on the status quo.

THE FUTURE

In a travel market guided increasingly and gradually towards a sustainable, ethical product, the dispersed hotel model might just raise the bar if it were to take hold beyond its current niche. For the growing number of guests seeking circular, culturally sensitive and net-positive experiences, what is currently on offer may eventually not suffice, and this demand will drive the major players to innovate, and experiment with form as Six Senses have.

A chain of dispersed hotels, however, would be a paradox in the context of its original purpose – that is, authentically individual properties

steadfastly fused to the local land and people. If the dispersed hotel is to be adopted and translated into mainstream hospitality, it runs the risk of becoming diluted. Those original Albergo Diffuso were born from necessity, their function to revive and exist alongside the communities they were welcomed into.

Even Hanare and The General Kyoto – although interpretations of the model that err from some core tenets – are underlined by its sense of revitalisation, occupying historic architecture as the manifesto demands, with the former a condemned cluster of art studios saved by a popular exhibition by the artists who once called it home. This narrative and organic symbiosis is arguably the source of the model's authenticity. To adapt the concept without this in mind would surely be to lose the element that defines it, and likely the social, environmental and commercial virtues that come with its intended execution.

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The town of Corippo, Switzerland – a 300-person settlement on the Swiss/Italian border – is looking to adopt the dispersed model as a means to revive the region

networking houses and services,” Dall’Ara explains. “There’s no environmental impact, and no social impact either, because Albergo Diffuso does not attract mass tourism. We use the process of marketing dell’*accoglienza* – investing in people rather than traditional promotional tools – to generate positive word of mouth that does not result in over-tourism, so even the marketing is sustainable.”

The team at Uchida Design touch on this too: “In recent years, over-tourism has become a problem – rapid changes and readily allowing the tourism industry to expand can destroy the culture of the town and its inhabitants. The General Kyoto, on the other hand, is considered a sustainable development, where we addressed contemporary issues such as eliminating plastic, adopting organic materials and cooperating with local residents.”

In a market that is often scrutinised for its waste, emissions and disruption, experiences like those provided by the dispersed hotel – allowing guests to offset the less savoury

consequences of their holiday with the knowledge that their stay will have some positive benefit – could prove the true definition of luxury in ten years time.

It may take some time for this shift to fully occur, and to see the dispersed hotel as a viable alternative for large operators, but with 40 years of evolution and gestation already behind it, and a variety of designers, architects and brands showing interest, the dispersed hotel is doing well to establish itself as one of the more intriguing formal experiments in hospitality.

In the last few years alone we’ve seen 28 of Amsterdam’s bridge houses transformed into the Sweets Hotel, whilst 25 canal residences became the sprawling Pulitzer. Elsewhere, a former boat-building workshop and fishmongers became part of the four-suite Graetzhotel Neubau spread around Vienna’s 7th District. All the while, the aforementioned Corippo soldiers on with the dispersed model at the heart of its plan. Watch all these spaces.

