
Importance of design for small Western Australian wineries

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the importance of winery facility design among operators of small wineries open to the public, and to what extent operators use this element to market their winery to visitors. A total of ten small wineries, eight of them representing the entire Chittering Valley Wine Trail near Perth in Western Australia, agreed to participate and to be interviewed face to face. Operators view their role in the design of their winery building in various ways, including using the cellar door as a critical tool to enhance visitors' winery experience. Of particular importance is the environment wineries promote through their uncomplicated yet inviting design. The very small sample of wineries in this study does not allow for making generalisations of the many existing small wineries in Western Australia. The value operators place on the association between the winery, the surroundings and the area where the winery is located is a critical component that will positively reflect on visitors' experience and may transcend beyond their visit. The study examines an emerging wine trail and a dimension, small winery design, that to date have received limited attention in academic research.

Keywords:

design, wineries, wine tourism, cellar door, winery owners, Western Australia

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of physical design

For more than two decades researchers have studied the relevance, functionality and overall role of physical design for businesses



(see, eg West and Hughes, 1991). Today, little doubt remains that the physical environment of a building can contribute to a company's well-being, particularly in terms of facilitating communication, creativity and teamwork (Earle, 2003). Baker *et al.* (2002) provide evidence of the impact of the building's environment on consumers of retail stores. In this regard, Alexander (2006) states that 'Usability is one of the most important, but most often neglected, aspects of building performance' (p. 262). Steiner (2005) also underlines the functionality of workplaces, or 'high-performance' buildings, where safety, health, comfort, flexibility, cost-effectiveness and other company needs can be satisfied. Bitner (1992) notes that 'The effect of atmospherics, or physical design and décor elements, on consumers and workers is recognized by managers and mentioned in virtually all marketing, retailing, and organizational behavior texts' (p. 57). In discussing hotel environmental friendliness, Jones (2002) explains how hotels' architecture and interior design can be a contributor in saving energy or preventing noise pollution. Ransley and Ingram (2001) link hotel design with higher sales and profitability. In addition, hotel facilities' physical and tangible elements continue to be very important in consumers' minds (Nickson *et al.*, 2002). Major problems, however, have historically affected hotels as a result of poor design (Jones, 1999).

A large body of academic research on design also exists within the field of hospitality. Bowie and Buttle (2004), for example, emphasise the value of interior design as it 'provides the tangible elements of the atmospherics in the hospitality product' (pp. 235–237). Apart from tangibles, ambient conditions, among other factors, are also identified as influential to customers' perceptions of the quality of a business's physical environment (Brady and Cronin, 2001). In examining hotel restaurants, Stipanuk and Roffman (2002, p. 461) and subsequently Stipanuk (2006, p. 447) provide specific details of the impact of design of restaurant facilities:

The intermediate zone is slightly more formal, and the 'interior' section includes leather banquettes, table linen, lower lighting levels, and such additional accessories as artwork. The restaurant is highly successful in part because it offers different moods for breakfast or dinner, for family groups or couples, and for informal meals or special-occasion dinners.

The impact and relevance of design, however, also extends to other tourism- and hospitality-related industries. This is for instance the case of wine tourism (Hall *et al.*, 2000; Mitchell and Hall, 2003), a concept that involves visitation to wineries, wine tastings and often food in combination with the wine product in cellar doors or restaurants.

The links between design and wine tourism

According to Charters and Pettigrew (2005), 'wine professionals use the association of wine to art and the aesthetic as a way of understanding — even promoting — their product' (p. 122). In fact, aesthetics can even play an important role on the way consumers respond to wine in the form of wine bottle label design (Charters *et al.*, 1999; Lunardo and Guerinet,

2007), or even in the packaging (Barber and Almanza, 2006). In studying winery visitors to the Niagara region in Canada, Carmichael (2005) praises the aesthetic value of the winery surroundings:

Survey results reveal that many visitors are seeking rest and relaxation, education, attractive scenery and a unique experience. The rural landscape provides an interesting and appealing backdrop for their touring activity. The wineries themselves are well maintained, often with gardens and wine barrels at their entrances, have a wide variation in design, ranging from French-chateau style to Italian villas to rustic old farm buildings. (p. 100)

In another study, Dodd and Gustafson (1997) explain an additional form of aesthetics, namely, that of wine labels, that according to these authors can negatively impact on customers' wine purchases.

Within the context of the winery visitation and visitors' overall experience, the importance of winery/cellar door design and ambience are discussed to various degrees, and for the most part from visitors' perspective. While the setting and surroundings of the winery can attract visitors to a region or enhance their experience (Roberts and Sparks, 2006), when it comes to the physical attributes of the winery, O'Neill and Charters (2000) comment that:

The cellar door is often the first contact consumers have with a winery and its wines. Therefore every aspect of the cellar door (including layout, appearance and staff) is of extreme importance. (p. 114)

Getz (2000) extends this view to assert that wine tourism entails 'a complete sensory experience' (p. 71) that includes taste, smell, touch, sight and sound. Dodd and Gustafson (1997) identify the winery environment, attractiveness and smells as positively impacting on visitors' attitudes, wine and souvenir purchases. Getz (2000) also outlines elements that contribute to the design of a 'tourist-oriented winery' (p. 71), underlying the importance of the winery's ambience as significantly contributing to the overall winery experience. Hekkert (2006) goes further to provide a thorough illustration of the potential impact of winery design:

We can for example look at the Domus winery of the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. In order to design a building that would perfectly fit into the California landscape of rocky hills, they build a cage-like construction and filled it with rocks from the surroundings. This simple solution results in a range of effects; the fit is easily established, the construction is cheap and very solid, the thick walls bring about a cool and constant inside temperature, and above all, the sunbeams that peep through the walls cause a poetic pattern of dancing lights. The net result is one of high aesthetic quality. (p. 7)

Undoubtedly, a large body of literature on facilities management exists (see, eg Ventovuori *et al.*, 2007) investigating a wide range of topics.



In regards to wineries and wine tourism, while many researchers place much emphasis on aspects related to the wineries' design, such as aesthetics, environment or ambiance, to date very little attention has been given to the importance of these and other aspects of winery design from winery operators' perspectives. Such limited knowledge is even more obvious among small- and medium-sized wineries, a group that, in the case of Australia, represents the great majority of wineries (Davidson, 2004). The main objective of this study is to gain insights on these dimensions to answer the following questions:

- How important is the physical design of the winery to operators?
- In what ways is it important?
- What are their overall views' of their wineries' design?

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger project investigating small and medium rural enterprises in a number of business-related areas. Among these businesses, the wineries that belong to the Chittering Valley near Perth in Western Australia were selected for this study. The total wine trail members, eight, and two additional wineries located on the same itinerary as the wine trail were also selected because they are also open to the public. According to information from the shire of Chittering (www.chittering.wa.gov.au/), the trail has only been established since 2004, and in 2007 its eighth member was incorporated. The relatively new nature of the trail and the objective to explore an emerging small wine region seeking development were the fundamental reasons for choosing this area as the field of study. In addition, the proximity of the wine trail to the researchers' university represented convenience in the form of minimising time and budget constraints. Clearly, the lack of academic research on the Chittering Valley wine trail presents an opportunity to learn about this wine trail using an exploratory approach as a first attempt in a longitudinal effort to follow the development of the wine trail in the future. The ten wineries were contacted early December by mail; the letter explained the purpose of the study and invited winery operators to participate in a face-to-face interview. A follow-up phone call was intended to confirm operators' participation, and with their agreement, to arrange interviews on operators' terms. All operators agreed to participate, and the face-to-face interviews were arranged and conducted between 14 December and 10 January, except during the end of the year holidays. While the month of December may be a busy month for some wineries, particularly those open to the public and booked for Christmas and other holiday events, special care was taken to ensure that operators would not be disrupted from their daily tasks at the winery.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE WINERY DESIGN TO SMALL WINERY OPERATORS?

A wide range of responses were identified when operators discussed the importance of their operations' design. Some respondents first chose to

explain the ‘antecedents’ of the winery visitation. This dimension entails the winery surroundings or landscape (Dodd, 2000) and how these elements form a first step prior to entering the winery cellar door or restaurant. Accordingly, for some operators attractive surroundings can provide a positive outlook of the winery, and an ideal introduction to the premises: ‘it’s important that we actually grow the grapes here. I think that appeals to people; people nowadays are looking for things that are more personal. We find that people that come here can see our wild flowers and the birds; they don’t have to fight their way to do their tasting. It doesn’t put money in your pocket but I get a lot of pleasure out of people coming’.

Developing from the surroundings dimension, operators are also aware of the critical importance of visitors’ expectations of the winery: ‘I think that [the physical design] is extremely important. Absolutely, that is the first impression you get as you walk into a winery; you look around and you see what it looks like, and you sort of form an opinion what you think it is very important, but we are still working on ours; it is a work in progress’.

As discussed in some studies (see, eg Steiner, 2005), the dimension of functionality also plays a critical role in the winery design: ‘I think in terms of the purely functional side of things I think it’s really important. We have a bit storeroom in the back specifically designed to cope with the heat we have up here. Massively thick concrete walls with insulation that provide all year round with cooling’.

Simplicity of the winery facilities, however, is also emphasised and associated with the aspect of relaxation, an element Carmichael (2005) identifies as a fundamental reason for visitors to travel to some of the wineries: ‘It [the physical design] does have an impact. It is not historically tied but it has historical interest. It’s all made of local wood. The construction of the building has appeal and many people think it’s very nice. We understand most people in the town have lived here sometime during their lives. Yes, it’s comfortable, it’s relaxed and it’s not commercial, and I think people like it because for those reasons: drop in, have a glass of wine and relax’. A total of three other operators mention the simplicity element as very important; one of them goes further to state that ‘We wanted to keep it really basic. We promote our winery as a country shearing shed design cellar door’.

Participants’ comments also underline the physical design of the winery, namely, in the form of maintaining a simple visual environment that can still be pleasing to the eye: ‘[The physical design] is important, I think. People seem to be quite happy with that rustic effect rather than something that has been specifically built that is more flash. They are looking for something different...’ The potential costs, particularly for the smaller wineries can be a determinant factor to undertake investments in the physical design of the cellar door. Operators, however, also seem to be aware of the importance of visitors’ perceptions of the place: ‘This area here [cellar door] with the views is very important. We had to compromise on the design in terms of cost basically, so some things are not exactly the way we wanted so we had to compromise. But I think people come in; they want to see something; obviously the view, and if



they find the place messy, untied and unattractive ultimately they will find the wine the same way. And that's part of my philosophy: it's an experience to come and try our wine and the ambience needs to be just right'.

Despite the intentional nature of providing a rustic, simple and relaxing design, improvisation played a part in the development in the design of some operations: 'We initially believed that we would build this [winery] facility primarily as an export facility. So, all of the winery has been put together from a functional point of view, and wine makers had great input into the design right from day one'. However, at the same time in subsequent construction phases there was a deliberate purpose to attract passers by: 'The face of the building was that [to] reflect the fact that it has a little bit of ambience for people driving by'. According to the same operator, making use of existing physical attributes with sentimental value and elevating them as iconic for the winery was at the heart of additional developments: 'The cellar door facility was a little out shattered but has been out there for many many years and it only became wine tasting venue if you like simply because people kept coming and asking if they could taste wine. Within the operation here we are effectively an industrial site; you don't particularly want people mocking around what it is in many areas an industrial site. So the determination was made to just make that little shed temporarily into a wine tasting area, but because it's bold and it became quite a cute little place nobody wants to see it bulled over and something modern put in its place. Everyone seems to think: it has its own little history in it, its own little drama in it, its own little ambience, and it wants to stay the same. So, development would probably be to enlarge that [existing shed] and enhance it slightly but still keep its rustic appearance because that's what our visitors like'.

A respondent's comment underlines the importance of blending the winery's physical facilities with the surrounding landscape: 'With us, we try [and] do in part the rustic feel. You are in the country and this is still a shed... hence we try to use shed look to it; so that's our focus, is trying to be country; fit with the landscape again. Hence, again, using trees and that thing. People, I think, don't want to come here and be in suburbia'. The rustic feel that blends into the unique landscape of the Chittering Valley, with its trees, farmland and undulating hills, but also the ambience can additionally provide a positive experience to a very diverse clientele: 'the rustic old barn. Yes, totally, it's the character. I mean, we could make this really pretty, and it wouldn't cost a lot of money to put in the ceilings and give it a sort of "nouveau," [...] but we just want character. We receive huge positive feedback. When the fireplace is going and it's roaring in the middle of winter, that's what people come for. They want to sit by the fire when it's tipping down of rain outside, or even when it's not tipping down of rain, just cosy fire, you know? That European... I mean, a lot of our customers are not just English, but Irish, French, German because of the European feeling of coming to our winery when it's half a tree in the fireplace and it's smoking a little bit. The locals come in the evening'.

One last comment suggests a positive approach undertaken among participants, namely, working together jointly. This strategy might help

businesses in promoting their distinctiveness, including their surroundings and design, elements that might attract visitors as an anticipation prior to starting a rapport with the winery's product: 'Because we are a small group of wineries on this trail we all meet and we all talk to each other and we all appreciate each other's style and we are all unique, and we do different products'. Wargenau and Che (2006) found evidence of the vital importance for wineries in a developing wine trail 'to assist each other' (p. 56). In the case of the Chittering Valley wineries, the small size of the wine trail membership appears to be an advantage in promoting close cooperation among operators.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A large body of literature, from facilities management to tourism and hospitality, highlights the importance of the physical design of operations. Regarding wineries and wine tourism, such importance is viewed in academic research mainly from winery visitors' perspective. Moreover, researchers pay rather little attention to study the design dimension from winery operators' points of views. This lack of research is particularly evident among operators of small wineries. As the findings illustrate, respondents perceive the design of their operations as a very critical element. For the most part, operators are also in agreement that the relaxing environment, the ambience at the winery as well as its aesthetics can have a strong impact on visitors. Arguably, these findings are to be expected of operators seeking to market their operations. However, what is interesting in respondents' answers is the variety of ways in which they are trying to please visitors; clearly, operators on the Chittering Valley wine trail are trying to exploit the uniqueness of their wineries' offerings. The antecedents in the form of surroundings of the winery, and later in the experience of the rustic appearance of the operation, blending with the unique rural surroundings of the Chittering Valley, are seen as aspects that create an association with visitors prior to the wine consumption.

The small sample of participating businesses and the absence of comparisons to other groups of wineries or wine regions represent the main limitations of this study. Hence, a cautious approach should be taken in regards to making generalisations of the wine industry in Western Australia or other regions based on this study's findings. While these limitations are acknowledged, the study also opens avenues for exploring the design dimension in future research. For example, to what extent:

- Are wineries prepared to invest in the physical design of their facilities?
- Do wineries measure their visitors' views of the design?
- Do wineries react to visitors' feedback of their design?

Further, are there differences on perceptions of physical design among operators based upon the winery size, that is, whether the winery is small or large?

Small wineries' operators pay much attention to design and are using this powerful element to create rapport between the winery operation and



its visitors. Such rapport might assist wineries in projecting a positive image of themselves and/or in educating visitors about what their operators stand for, or their business philosophy. Finally, such rapport could also be beneficial in building an emotive or sentimental link between visitors and the winery, a factor that might prove critical when visitors try to recognise the winery's label in post-visit situations, or in repeating their visit. In fact, Mitchell (2006) found that among other elements, the image of the winery was essential for people to purchase the winery's wines after they had made their visit. Thus, because for many visitors physical appearances and/or the overall impact of the winery's environment and ambiance might be deciding aspects when choosing a wine label or a winery to travel to, wineries need to continue paying special attention to this key element.

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