A spa culture for the nineties and thereafter: health and relaxation in an urban setting.

Une culture des "bains" pour les années 90: santé et détente dans l'espace urbain

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L'exposé considère la possibilité d'une renaissance de la culture des villes d'eau à la fin du 20ème siècle et effectue des comparaisons avec l'âge d'or des bains à la fin du siècle dernier. Trois villes sont citées en exemple: Karlovy Vary, Budapest et Llandrindod Wells. Il est montré comment les vieilles villes d'eau d'Europe Centrale sont restaurées pour servir d'alternative aux stations balnéaires traditionnelles, qui sont menacées par la diminution actuelle de la couche d'ozone et la pollution. Les villes d'eau, sources de santé physique et spirituelle dans l'environnement urbain, profitent également aux revenus touristiques d'un pays. Il semble que la Grande-Bretagne ait négligé un tel programme de rénovation, et préfère les vacances-santé "new age" destinées aux classes sociales favorisées. Les possibilités d'une renaissance sont étouffées par la bureaucratie et l'apatheie.

Mots clé: Villes d'eau, santé, détente, renaissance, environnement urbain.

Key words: Spa, health, relaxation, renewal, urban environment.

A century ago, the continent of Europe and Britain were filled with Victorian gentefolk spending their holidays, "taking the waters" at fashionable resorts from Baden Baden and Carlsbad to Llandrindod Wells and Harrogate. Yet, two world wars later, the Spa holiday had all but disappeared in Britain, replaced by the more proletarian "seaside Breaks" at Blackpool, Brighton and Rhyl whilst those still wishing the atmosphere and cure of the old times were forced to travel abroad for their pleasures (Boatie 1992: 240-241). This paper takes a look at the prospects for revival of a Spa culture at the end of the twentieth century, when interests in alternative health treatments are in the ascent and
an ever more dangerous gamble with premature aging and skin cancers. In order to show the developments and the future potential for such a growth in the specifically urban Spas, the authors will concentrate on three towns - Karlovy Vary, one of the great nineteenth century Spas, in the Czech Republic, Budapest, capital city of Hungary, and Llandrindod Wells, county town of Powys in Wales.

Karlovy Vary with its tradition of drinking the waters from its twelve springs and Budapest with its ancient hot baths from the Turkish period have been chosen to demonstrate a still thriving spa culture in central Europe. By contrast, Llandrindod Wells was a spa town in the past, still has its spring water, but stands as a typical example of the decline of the spa culture in the UK.

Karlovy Vary

Karlovy Vary (formerly Carlsbad) makes up, together with Marienbad and Franzensbad, the famed Bohemian triangle of Spas which exercised such a fascination on nineteenth century travelers from Goethe to Karl Marx as witnessed by the guest lists in the town library (Fink 1992: 26). Unlike nearby Marienbad (an almost entirely nineteenth century development), Carlsbad was founded as a German settlement as long ago as 1350. Despite its six hundred and fifty years of history, most of the town was rebuilt in the nineteenth century, much of it in the Art Nouveau or Szecesszion style (Mráz 1991: 49-50 & 51-52). Karlovy Vary today is a flourishing Spa town, host to an international film festival each year and even recently to the international "Jeux sans Frontières" television game show. The town is also a regional shopping centre and within the last few years has seen considerable redevelopment of tourist facilities (hotels and restaurants) as well as high investment on restoration and refurbishment of the historic buildings of the town. The wooden and iron colonnades are being restored to their former glory, new hotels constructed in traditional style, older hotels brought up to international luxury standards. Exclusive shops and boutiques have been created for the influx of wealthy tourists from Germany and Austria and national and international banks are restoring some of the almost derelict architectural gems of the town. The introduction of private capital in the formerly socialist Czech Republic has allowed for an acceleration of development of the town and has also allowed for a more consciously environmental approach to reconstruction (two newly renovated hotels on the river promenade show this new approach to harmony). The socialist government was, however, responsible for maintaining the status of the town as a health resort from 1948 onwards and (despite the inappropriately designed monster Thermal Hotel from those years and the deterioration of the turn of the century housing stock that makes up much of the
inner town), Karlovy Vary cannot be said to have gone into a decline after the Second World War. Although today’s specific treatments take place in special sanatoria, guest accommodation abounds in all classes from the luxurious old fashioned Grand Hotel Pupp (Mráz 1991; 50-51) down to rooms in private homes and the waters from the springs of the town are available free to all visitors who have taken the precaution of bringing a drinking cup along. Karlovy Vary has thus continued since its early days to be a respected and popular Spa resort which nowadays attracts both young and old, Czech and foreign visitors, day trippers and long-term guests seeking relaxation, amusement and the waters. New investment from within and outside the country is ensuring a ‘spa fit for the twenty first century which still prides itself on its historic, architectural and cultural traditions (Mráz 1991; 52-53).

Budapest

Although Karlovy Vary can be seen as a regional centre as well as a Spa town, it cannot compare in stature with Budapest, which is not only a Spa town but also a capital city. This means that, as well as a health and relaxation centre, the town/city has to work as the commercial and political centre of the country. Hungary has been developing as something of an economic success both within and without the socialist system but recent developments in Europe and in particular, within the former socialist states of eastern Europe may have brought Hungary almost to the brink of bankruptcy. Budapest is the “City of Baths” (Vida 1992; 16 & 23-28) and suffers both the advantage and disadvantage that its main Spa facilities date from the time of Turkish domination some three hundred years ago. This means that the major baths of the city (which lie in Buda on the left bank of the Danube) are not only health resorts, but also historic monuments. Recent drastic cuts in budget, since the privatisation of the Budapest Spa authority, mean that little money is available for modernisation of the basic facilities of the baths, such as showers, tap fittings, changing facilities etc. Despite this, the Baths of Buda (as well as the monumental nineteenth century Széchenyi Bath in Pest) are used regularly by the population for relaxation and for health purposes (bathing, rehabilitation and locomotor disorder therapies, drinking, swimming etc.) both privately and upon medical advice (certain baths, such as Lukác and Czécszor are sanatoria and not open to the general public). The current success story of Budapest is that of the most famous of the Spa Hotels - the Gellért (Csónyey et al 1970; 9-23). Here, the German Steigenberger Group has bought into the national Danubius Group hotel but not into the adjoining independent Baths company. The result is that foreign (and local) tourists can stay in a famous, historic hotel in the centre of the city and have preferential entrance facilities for the adjoining medicinal Baths and treatments whilst locals are still able to use these health facilities
upon payment of a minimal entrance charge. Current opinion in the Spa Directorate is that such a coexistence may provide the answer to redevelopment of the other historic Baths of the city (e.g. Rudas, Rácza, Kirdly (Csörneyi et al 1970; 59-71, 73-79 & 81-86 respectively)) by building hotels adjacent to these facilities where foreign tourists would have a preferential (i.e. free and unlimited) entry to the Baths whilst, at the same time, the local residents of Budapest would retain their right of entrance at current rates. Thus, what is seen in Hungary as a beneficial resource for the Budapest inhabitants remains accessible to locals on lower incomes (in Western terms) whilst also being available to tourists looking for a health holiday who have a higher disposable income. The Spa Directorate would thus hope, from this income, to be able to maintain the status quo as well as to institute refurbishments and improvements to these historic baths.

Llandrindod Wells

Llandrindod Wells is, like Karlovy Vary, a regional centre - it is the county town of Powys (formerly Radnorshire). As such, although it is a small town, it has an importance beyond its size. Llandrindod is a Victorian Spa and its development and time as an elegant watering place is confined to a period approximately from 1870 to the end of the first world war (Buxton 1906; 17-87) Llandrindod is a Spa of drinking waters and was developed as a place for the well to do middle classes to spend a relaxing time taking the waters. This is not to deny that the springs of Llandrindod were known for their medicinal and beneficial health properties and several people came regularly for their cure at the end of the century. The development of the Spa in Victorian times led to the creation of a park housing the springs and Spa buildings in the ironwork style of Karlovy Vary and the railway architecture that was then springing up. Indeed, it was the opening of a railway station at Llandrindod in 1868 that led to the popularity of the town as an inland resort, this together with the building of several impressive hotels, including the Bridge (now Metropole) facing its elegant town park square and bandstand (Anon undated; 1-6). Llandrindod was built for the new wealth of the adjacent Midlands and faced its decline when the world order as it was collapsed after 1918 (Anon undated; 7). In recent times, redevelopment funds (principally from the EU) aimed at this neglected part of central Wales have been poured into Llandrindod to restore its Spa. Apart from the obvious aesthetic delights such as building an soulless indoor bowling hall next to the old Pavilion (still awaiting completion of restoration) by the peaceful Rock garden, much has been done to restore the town to its former glory. The Spa park, an integral feature of all major European Spas where walking off the effects of drinking the waters was considered an integral part of the treatment, has been lovingly refurbished with new paths and the centre
of the Spa, the Spa buildings themselves have been brought back to full working order. Visitors should now be able to sit on the terrace or in the cafe and enjoy a glass of one or all of the local waters. The Hotel Metropole has also been restored to fit in with the ambiance of the old town and a new "Health Spa" (Beatie 1992; 7-13) has been added to the hotel in a mock Victorian style conservatory building for guests to enjoy the "modern" Spa - a menu of a health farm - heated swimming pool, Jacuzzi, Sauna, Exercise machinery etc., the hotel has also a high class restaurant and is a conference centre (Beatie 1992; 190-191). Llandrindod Wells has thus become a blue print for a modernisation of British Spas to compete with Europe - or has it? On a recent visit (October 1993), unfortunately the cafe in the Spa park was firmly closed, a notice on the entrance door stating that no water could be sold because of enquiries and tests under the Water Act of 1991. The one spring remaining open was the chalybeate spring within the park (difficult to close off as it stand completely in the open) and that was certainly not being patronised. Britain is receiving severe criticism from the E.U. for its standards of water purity and it is ironic that a Spa town revived with the help of E.U. grants should be prejudiced by E.U. water directives. As it is, the Metropole Hotel has a healthy trade in conference delegates and tourists enjoying the clear air and fine scenery of mid-Wales even without the elegance of taking the waters across the railway line in the lower town. Needless to say, it is the lower town where the post war decay of Llandrindod is most evident and it is arguably a matter of concern whether the attempt to revive one of Britain's Spas may founder on bureaucracy and lack of genuine interest.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the attempts at reopening Llandrindod Wells and projects such as the restoration of the Victorian Turkish Baths at Harrogate, (Donaldson 1993) Britain still remains far behind central Europe in taking its Spas seriously. In France and Belgium, whole seaside resorts are gearing up to the new fashions of thalassotherapy - the Spa by the sea (Odeust 1990; 38-42, Husson 1993 & Ryan 1993). In the new Czech Republic, the glories of nineteenth century spa life are being revived in the restoration of luxury hotels and bathing and drinking facilities. In Hungary, joint ventures are showing the way for the invigoration and preservation of a bathing culture which has remained a central part of everyday life since the Turkish period. These are all examples which can and should be taken into account by a weak British tourist industry. Budapest may seem unique as the city of baths, but two hundred years ago, London had a similar reputation - Epsom, Sadlers Wells, Beulah, Lambeth, Clerkenwell and many other "Spas" flourished in those days, all to be walled
up or to run dry and be forgotten (for a general view of British Spas see Addison 1951). There is an argument for better use of leisure time and for more alternative health consciousness. In the 1980s, health farms have shown a new and growing demand for water-based health breaks in the countryside (Beattie 1992; 240-248). In the present day urban environment of stress and decay, the Spa complex within the city would offer alternative facilities without the need to travel far. Whilst sunbathers take to their high factor creams and fear polluted seas and beaches, the Spa presents a healthy alternative. Not long ago, the British would never have considered drinking bottled waters, spending a weekend in the jacuzzi of a health farm, or giving birth in water pools in hospitals; the trend towards a revival for the British Spa is already evident, the question is whether the tourist and health industries will be ready and eager to meet the new challenge or whether Karlovy Vary and Budapest will be left to flourish and draw in tourist revenue whilst the doors to Llandrindod Wells remain firmly closed.

Selected References

Arnos. (undated) The Story of the Metropole. for Best Western Hotels
Thus, spas offer rich opportunities for flirting. Visitors to Borzhom and other spas in the Caucasus region in the nineteenth century could simultaneously explore the borderlands of Russia and the borderlands of decorum. In the theatrical world of the spa town, the stage is populated by transients—where all spa therapies do eventually run their course, and the day must come when the players return to their normal lives with healthy looks and lots of discretion. The spa became a leitmotif in Russian literature. The longest of the five novellas that make up Mikhail Lermontov’s A Hero of Our Time is set in a spa in the Caucasus. Spas are places to look for lovers and they are equally places to get over troubled relationships. The Solovetsky Archipelago, which is now a historical and cultural reserve, is fascinating not only because of its dramatic history, but also because of its unusual landscape, including hills, lakes, and gullies. The Solovetsky Archipelago has been under UNESCO protection since 1992. White-Stone Monuments of Vladimir and Suzdal. These are among the most ancient Russian cities that were at the helm of the old-Russian Vladimir-Suzdal principality in the 12th and 13th centuries and which still preserve some unique architectural and artistic features you won’t find anywhere else. These features include masonry from white limestone, refined proportions, exquisite stone carving, and an exterior “lightness” of the buildings that all blend in with the surrounding landscape.