

Article

The Role of Sustainable Events in the Management of Historic Buildings

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Abstract: As the use of historic building as venues for commercial activity grows, events management professionals working in historic buildings are faced with a number of sustainability challenges, including conservation, preservation, social value and financial sustainability, as well as with satisfying their clients. In particular, these professionals are required to maintain the complex balance between the competing priorities of historic value and contemporary relevance. Little research has thus far investigated the role that sustainable events can play in the management of historic buildings, beyond considerations of the trade-off between conservation and income generation. This research analyses the contribution that events can make to the sustainable management of historic buildings, with an emphasis on understanding the perspectives of event managers within these properties, based on qualitative interviews with historic building event managers and stakeholders in London, United Kingdom. A key finding of the research is that event managers within historic buildings have complex views of sustainability that are specific to these properties and which are not captured in the mainstream events management literature. The paper contributes to the emerging literature on sustainable events and also develops earlier research on the role of events and other income-generating activities in historic buildings.

Keywords: historic building; sustainability; heritage management; events management

1. Introduction

Event management within historic buildings is a rapidly growing, yet complex part of the events industry [1,2]. The concept of heritage includes both the natural and cultural environments; encompassing historic places, landscapes, built environments, biodiversity, past and present cultural practices and traditions, knowledge and living experiences [3,4]. The collective memory embodied in each site is unique and an underpinning for development now and in the future [5]. The umbrella title of heritage encompasses a wide range of properties, including historic buildings [6] which are the sole focus of this paper. The overall aim of this research was to establish the role that events play in the sustainable management of historic buildings. Specifically, how can events contribute towards sustainability in historic buildings and what management challenges must be considered in the delivery of events within the sustainable management of these properties?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describe a heritage location as a setting in which parts of history, whether that is cultural, military, political or social, have taken place, and have been preserved for their cultural heritage value [7]. The decision to preserve and protect historic buildings generally depends upon the educational qualities they possess and as locations that define history in some way [8]. The Historic Houses Association (HHA, London, UK) in the United Kingdom (UK) classifies historic buildings as the buildings that are officially designated as such through the listing system, stating that “as of 2016 there were 377,587

listed buildings in England” [9]. HHA avoid strict criteria, although explain that the building has to have been in existence for approximately 40 years before it can be considered for listing.

Historic buildings are not always able to rely on their traditional wealthy benefactors. This has forced their custodians to seek out supplementary sources of income, in particular hosting events [10]. This means that historic buildings face a dilemma between the often conservative perspectives of the local community, the risk, and the increased cost involved with additional restoration required resulting from the wear and tear caused by events, and the money generated by the events. Events can be managed to be impact-neutral, or to use the generated revenue to fund preservation and conservation works [11]. It is important that heritage buildings form a contemporary identity that complements their surroundings so that people can identify with them and maintain an interest in their survival [12–15]; hosting events and operating as visitor attractions of other kinds can play a significant role in this.

Many historic buildings are also within wider cultural heritage sites, and world heritage sites (WHS) and therefore are significant tourism destinations. Tourism can play a significant role in their funding and maintenance [16]. Tourism within historic buildings can be difficult to manage, however, it is often necessary and justifies the existence of WHS to some extent [16,17]. One significant study examined visitor attractions and the continued requirement to generate financial income in order to sustain parks, gardens and historic buildings. For example, in the UK, Jane Austin’s houses are an important part of the heritage tourism industry, indeed they “are such an important feature of the English landscape and social history, [they] require money” to sustain them [18] (p. 116). A review [19] of the literature on the visitor attractions sector, identified specific management issues, including “how factors such as ownership and visitor volume help to explain the complexities encountered in managing visitor attractions” [19] (p. 155). Many historic buildings that still exist have operated as visitor attractions to raise revenue, and are now diversifying into providing event venue and management services [20].

There is an apparent tension between event managers within heritage buildings and their owners, with event managers aiming to deliver the best possible event experience, versus owners aiming to preserve the heritage of the property [21]. It is necessary for managers of heritage buildings to consider the level of wear and tear caused as a result of a high footfall within the buildings, and aim to balance this with the level of income generated as a result of the footfall [17,22]. Authors have explored the similar management issues related to both visitor attractions and events, with the aim of defining management issues and influences for each [16,21]. It has been identified that a consideration of the related operations of events and visitor attractions has “implications for the research agenda for future research studies” [21] (p. 552). Many visitor attractions are not for profit organisations and the revenue generated via events goes in turn to support alternative facets of the organisations’ ventures [23] (p. 265).

As well as promotion, strategic leadership and revenue management, historic building managers are required to focus on cultural sustainability, and heritage [24–26], which adds a complexity to the staging of events not faced by other venues, in particular regarding sustainability. Historic buildings, along with castles, visitor attractions, boats, sports stadiums and galleries have been classified as ‘unusual venues’ [27], indicating that their use does not fall within the standard overview of the events management literature. One typology of event venues has been developed [28], which categorises venues by their strategic focus, their market, their physical features, the services they provide and the nature of activity within the venue. Using this typology, historic buildings have events as a secondary strategic focus, usually operating in a prestige section of the events marketplace whether for commercial or private hire, with historical physical characteristics. The services offered by each historic building venue will differ, as will the kind of event activity that will be sustainable for these unusual venues, explaining why there has been a lack of focus on these properties in the events management literature. The following section of this paper sets out the methods through

which the importance of the sustainability of the events held in historic buildings was investigated in this research.

2. Methods

Interpretivist, qualitative research [29,30] with event managers in historic buildings was undertaken in order to develop an understanding of the ways in which events contributed to the sustainable management of these types of properties. Sustainability is a relatively new perspective within events management, therefore this research adopted an interpretative approach to assess the implementation of sustainable events within historic building management and to develop new knowledge in this area [31–33]. This method aimed to explore and build a holistic assessment of experts' views by making sense of current phenomena and trends, and gaining an insight into the interviewees' recent experiences, whereas the majority of previous studies into sustainable events have favoured quantitative approaches [34–36]. Data was collected through twenty-one in-depth, qualitative interviews. A semi-structured interview approach was used to focus on the complex social and business interactions involved in event management [37]. The interviews were designed thematically, using key themes identified in previous research into sustainable events [38,39] and also on the effective management of visitor attractions [31]. Accordingly, the four themes that were used to guide the design of the interview questions were: Event managers' understanding of the concept of sustainability; the relative importance of different aspects of sustainability; contemporary management challenges associated with working in historic buildings and; the specific role that events play in the management of historic buildings. These themes were used to structure the presentation of the qualitative data in the findings section, below.

Selecting the most effective sample of participants to include in a study was important as “in any research project since it is rarely practical, efficient or ethical to study whole populations” [40] (p. 521). In order to determine the optimum sample size, the “parameters of the phenomenon” under investigation, such as the “rarity of the event or the expected size of differences in outcome” were considered [40] (p. 521). To achieve this, a non-probable purposive sample targeting a specific population with a mix of characteristics was selected. The sample selection aimed to gain an understanding of what stakeholders deem typical [41]. By making use of key stakeholders to identify ‘average-like’ perceptions of the importance of historic buildings, and the role that events can play in their maintenance and sustainability it was possible to attain a general consensus view [42]. The interviewees reflected the diverse nature of events, and were directed towards a heterogeneous group of historic building custodians, managers and event managers whose buildings are hired as event venues. A similar research strategy has been employed in other settings to develop an understanding of the perspectives of professionals on sustainability issues in other events management contexts [43–45]. A total of 21 interviews of between 1–2 h long (see Table 1, below) were carried out with event managers and key stakeholders of historic buildings within London. London is the centre of the events industry in the UK and a key destination for event planners in Europe; it is also characterised by the presence of a high number of heritage sites and historic buildings. Because of this, it provided an ideal case study within which to investigate the relationship between sustainable events and historic buildings. Figures 1 and 2, below, show the exterior of Trinity House, in the City of London, which is an example of the types of historic building considered in this research, as well as the event facilities that it offers, which are typical of this type of property.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Property Details	Job Title	Category of Expertise	Interviewee Number
Livery Hall	General Manager	Event Manager Heritage Property	R1
City Guide	PR/Historian	Heritage Management Expert	R2
Historic House and Venue Space	Owner/Managing Director	Event Manager Heritage Property	R3
Event and Conference Management Consultancy	Event Manager	Event Management Expert	R4
Livery Hall	General Manager	Event Manager Heritage Property	R5
Event Management Company	Director	Event Management Expert	R6
Theatre and Event Space	Head of Sales	Event Manager Heritage Property	R7
Event and Conference Management Consultancy	Director	Event Management Expert	R8
Historic House and Venue Space	Events Director	Event Manager Heritage Property	R9
Historic House Company	Director General	Heritage Management Expert	R10
Historic House and Venue Space	Corporate Secretary	Heritage Management Expert	R11
Historic House and Venue Space	Head of Functions and Events	Event Manager Heritage Property	R12
Historic Building Management Consultancy	Managing Partner	Heritage Management Expert	R13
Historic Castle and Venue Space	Head of Events	Event Manager Heritage Property	R14
Historic Maritime Venue	Theatre and Events Manager	Event Manager Heritage Property	R15
Historic Maritime Venue	Theatre and Events Officer	Event Manager Heritage Property	R16
Historic House and Venue Space	Head of Commercial Activity and Marketing	Event Manager Heritage Property	R17
Listed Venue and University	Event Manager	Event Manager Heritage Property	R18
Event and Conference Management Consultancy	Director	Event Management Expert	R19
Listed Venue and University	Director Public Engagement	Event Manager Heritage Property	R20
Historic House and Venue Space	House Manager	Event Manager of a Heritage Property	R21

**Figure 1.** Trinity House exterior. Source: Author.



Figure 2. Trinity House event facilities. Source: Author.

The final sample size was determined when saturation point was reached. Saturation point has been classified “as the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data” [46] (p. 454). The interviews took place between 23 May and 28 June 2017. The responses were analysed using NVivo version 11 software (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia), using a thematic content analysis approach; codes and themes were developed deductively from the literature review of the study and also inductively as part of the qualitative interview transcription and analysis process. Interview data associated with each code was then utilised, categorised and qualitatively analysed in the context of the themes outlined above. Part of this process involves comparisons with previously published studies and relevant aspects of this have been summarised in the discussion section of this paper.

3. Findings

3.1. Perceptions of Sustainability

When asked what first comes to mind when they hear the word ‘sustainability’ in event management, often interviewees immediately thought of environmental and financial sustainability. By this R1 meant ‘not harming the environment’ and keeping waste to a minimum while simultaneously keeping their business alive and strong. A small number of interviewees emphasized the use of ethically sourced products. When asked which aspect of sustainability the interviewees considered most important, environmental sustainability came in joint third place with social sustainability, while cultural sustainability was deemed to sit in harmony with financial sustainability as the most important aspects. Some interviewees mentioned the ‘three-legged stool’, and R7 explained that “environmental sustainability has gone down in the pecking order.” Social sustainability was seen to be important to the interviewees, in terms of keeping people happy. In this case, by ‘keeping people happy’, R4 meant giving event guests good experiences to keep them coming back for more.

R10 stated: “Cultural and financial. One can’t exist without the other.” The most common perception of what defines cultural sustainability was the educational work the organisations carry out alongside their events. Interviewees wanted to expose the buildings and their heritage to everybody, and to preserve history for local communities, tourists and future generations to learn about and enjoy; they saw events as a tool in that. The general consensus was that without cultural sustainability, there was little point in striving for financial sustainability. Ultimately, all of the interviewees were business-minded, and understood that without the financial support from events the other aspects of sustainability cannot happen. To be sustainable, one needs to think long-term, as R13 explained, to “benefit after the payback period.” All of the interviewees commented that holding events in these buildings is one of the best ways to achieve this.

3.2. The Role of Events in Historic Buildings

When asked about the role of events in the management of historic buildings, interviewees were clear that this was a secondary purpose of these facilities. The buildings add wow factor to events and they are educational in their own right by educating delegates about the history of the building and its organisation. R17 asked: “How can you justify not having events to educate people?” R3 explained when these buildings were originally built, particularly the stately homes, they were built with the purpose “to entertain, as grand entertainment places, where you would bring your inner circle, your political circle and they would stay for weeks at a time, and they were entertained to a high level.” Contemporary events are often considered to be a modern-day continuation of their original purpose, and the custodians have found a method to retain the original purpose of an historic building.

Interviewees pointed out that some historic buildings still receive significant government funding which means they must justify their existence. By opening the buildings to the public at least three goals are achieved: Firstly, to educate people; secondly, as R3 described to give people pleasure; next, to raise money to pay for their upkeep: “Governments have realised that there is a value to broader society in having these houses looked after by unpaid custodians.”

In summary, the overall opinion of the interviewees was that even if the sole reason for people entering a historic building is to drink champagne at an event this is still considered beneficial in the overall scheme of increasing awareness, education and justification of existence for them. R10 articulated “The fact is people love having events in historic building. They love the sense of an event taking place where other significant events have happened in the past.”

3.3. Management Challenges Associated with Events in Historic Buildings

When asked about the challenges associated with holding events in historic buildings, the answers were broken down into three different categories: Preservation, management and sustainability. The overriding preservation challenge was the wear and tear caused by events. R9 acknowledged “High volume means damage.” However, all of the interviewees were united in the opinion that without events at all, there would not be sufficient financial backing and the buildings could not be physically sustained. Another preservation challenge listed was temperature control. R12 explained that “Some humidity for the furniture, paintings and fabrics to breathe is good, but not necessarily comfortable for people.” Tradespeople with specialist restoration skills are becoming difficult to find, thereby increasing preservation challenges further. As R9 said: Stonemasonry, plastering, silk working [amongst other specialist trades] are all “becoming lost arts, it is increasingly difficult to find people to carry out the work when you want them to do the work.”

Another significant sustainability challenge was recycling. R11 explained “The Corporation of London and the City of London do not make it easy enough. Recycling often incurs additional cost which in turn needs to be relayed onto the client.” R11 explained that in order to run their air conditioning units, their boilers need to be operating, which means the carbon footprint of that building is excessively high. Few interviewees commented on the carbon footprint of their building. It was acknowledged that the buildings possess poor thermal properties and do not meet current standards,

however R13 pointed out that that you could argue “if you’re dealing with a building that has been on a site for 250 years, in itself there is some embedded sustainability in the very fact that the existing structure is still there.” Management challenges faced on a day-to-day basis were more practical. Some buildings cannot allow red wine in certain areas, others no drinks at all. Some buildings do not allow people to wear stiletto heels. Others do not have running water, kitchens, or a power supply, which means food for events is required to be ‘hot-boxed’ in. Storage within these buildings was said to be a challenge. Although the buildings were built with entertainment in mind, they were not built with a view of having in excess of 200 events per year, therefore allowances were not made for storing furniture or equipment. Staffing levels were noted as a serious factor for consideration. To be financially sustainable, the buildings must carefully balance outgoing expenses with incoming venue hire revenue. Therefore, many of these historic houses have small events teams, which in turn can limit the number of events accepted within the houses.

3.4. Sustainable Events in Historic Buildings

When asked whether they have ever worked on an event that marketed itself as ‘sustainable’, the majority of interviewees answered ‘no’. R4 said their clients never fail to comment if they hold an event in a venue that uses non-reusable or non-recyclable cups. R8 noted “every year we had to reduce our unit costs on the events that we produced, and thinking sustainably helped us do that.” In addition, R8 pointed out some venues do not provide recycling facilities, which meant they had to hire a van to collect the recyclable materials, which negatively off-set the positive aspects of recycling. In general, interviewees noted efforts were made to reduce paper usage, and fewer paper handouts were given at events.

Many of the historic building do not have appropriate facilities for events, meaning that outside catering companies, audio visual (AV) companies, and other external suppliers were employed by clients. The vehicles used by these suppliers to deliver and collect equipment increased the carbon footprint of every event. However, the positive aspect of using only outside suppliers meant clients were able to tailor their event to meet their needs as closely as possible, which thereby increased the positive experience of the event, and therefore means clients are more likely to return to hold another event in the same venue, increasing financial sustainability.

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned having sustainability policies, or conservation, care and collection (CCC) policies. Additionally, interviewees pointed out that their external suppliers generally have sustainability policies, which shows that these suppliers are doing what they can to show their awareness in order to be allowed to work in these historic venues. R19 rationalised that external suppliers rely on venues allowing them to work there, which means they will “go the extra mile to set themselves apart from their competition.” Only one interviewee mentioned asking clients to see their sustainability policy before accepting their booking. It was noted that by doing so, they risk losing business, and therefore sacrificing financial sustainability. A small number of interviewees noted some of their clients focus particularly on the venues’ sustainability policy before agreeing to hold an event there, because that could impact on the message of their event.

For interviewees, the primary concern for hosting ‘sustainable’ events is whether the carbon footprint is kept to a minimum, and to ensure everything that is used is recyclable or reusable, but also that to host an environmentally-friendly event, or hosting a sustainable event will not necessarily be financially sustainable and as R5 put it “the bottom line is we want to make money and so we realised that environmental friendliness has moved down in our list of priorities.” The following section of this paper discusses these findings in the context of the literature reviewed above, so that conclusions can be drawn from this research.

4. Discussion

The findings of this research confirmed the earlier cited [28] typology of event venues when looking at the role of events in the sustainable management of historic buildings. Although the range

of venues included in the sample shared some characteristics, they were also very diverse in terms of the specificities of their heritage, not least in terms of their age and primary purpose. Information gained from the interviews confirmed that this typology can be used to classify these historic venues as having events as a secondary strategic focus, which tend to offer themselves to the higher value segments of the events marketplace whether for commercial or private hire, with historical physical characteristics and that they emphasise their historical characteristics to give them a competitive advantage in doing so. The specific nature of each building however, does limit the types of events that they can host, so this part of the event venue market is not as uniform as more standardized products, such as corporate event venues, or meeting rooms.

It has been argued [47,48] that tangible and intangible cultural capital merge in the use of historic buildings, including the use of the artefacts and artworks the buildings contain. This research agrees with this assessment. Marketers of historic buildings often depend on people's interest and passion for historical significance and events in order to advertise historic building as event spaces, which is an increasing trend. Clients choose to book events in buildings with which they relate, and in many cases will repeat these events annually or more or less frequently. It is these ancillary effects of heritage that enable historic buildings to achieve their social and financial purpose.

This research shows that those responsible for events in historic buildings place a greater value on their role than financial gain exclusively. It was evident that the passion for the heritage of their buildings borne by the interviewees, in terms of the condition and authenticity of the building, was a significantly large portion of their *raison d'être*, and financial stability was simply a means, albeit essential, to achieve a more broad goal of sustainability.

Interviewees remarked on the naturally social aspects of events, which in turn reflects on the social sustainability of these buildings. Holding events contributes to the significant objective of ensuring the buildings are available for future generations to learn from, while creating a unique competitive environment within which to raise revenue [49], lending support to the argument that heritage buildings add value to contemporary society through their efforts to engage modern communities [13–15]. These efforts are driven by the fact that events managers in historic buildings see that financial stability, diversification and new product development are vital to the success of these buildings. Event managers' desire and ability to engage with event planners and event delegates broadens public engagement with historic buildings, and this research evidences the popularity of these unique event spaces, demonstrating the demand for such events.

A key management challenge of historic building custodians and event managers has been described as creating 'institutional value' and ensuring they can continue to justify the retention and preservation of their buildings [49]. Leask [38] identified a challenge as being that there were multiple methods used to measure effectiveness by different stakeholders in accordance with their individual priorities. Another significant challenge was that as well as capacity building, strategic leadership and revenue management, heritage managers are required to focus on cultural sustainability, and its heritage [24,25,50,51]. In this research, despite incorporating all of these elements into their roles, historic building custodians, managers and event managers listed a number of practical management challenges, namely: Technology, staff management, logistics between events, and communication amongst different departments, confirming the findings of previous research into visitor attraction management within heritage contexts.

The interviewees' immediate thought of what constitutes a sustainable event was that an event should be environmentally friendly. Event managers and event delegates are more aware of the use of recyclable and reusable resources, and there has been a reduction in the amount of paper handouts used during events, in favour of mobile applications (apps), which instead has increased pressure on the historic building to supply sufficient Wi-Fi to enable this, or risk losing business [52]. This is a specific management challenge for historic buildings, as they generally have thick walls and high ceilings, limiting the achievable Wi-Fi range [53]. Carbon footprint, a concern of the interviewees, will continue to be an issue in historic buildings [54] due to the fact that their events are often operated

using external suppliers for catering, AV suppliers and other services are delivered and collected in multiple vehicles. Carbon footprint is also an issue due to the fact that the buildings are generally not well insulated, if at all, as was the construction style at the time of building. Murgul [55] concluded that it could be feasible to upgrade the energy efficiency of an historic building, although this would require a complex and costly approach.

The recurring answer to the question of the specific sustainability challenges encountered during the hosting of events in historic buildings was recycling and the difficulty historic venues have in doing so. Event managers explained that there are explicit limitations placed on them to recycle items by their local authority. For example, many historic buildings in London are restricted to domestic waste collections, as opposed to industrial waste collections. This often results in the requirement for clients and suppliers to arrange a vehicle to collect waste produced during their event, which in turn negatively offsets the positive benefits of recycling [56] making it challenging to create a sustainable event. Another sustainability challenge faced by historic custodians, managers and event managers is the ability to maintain the fabric of the building within the English Heritage listing regulations. Approval is required for every decision based on English Heritage guidelines, and often the proposal is rejected. This indicates that while listing a building protects it from being intentionally destroyed, the listing guidance can be more of a hindrance when attempting to fit a modern, sustainable event into an historic building [15]. It is clear from the interviewees' responses, and the lack of academic literature regarding sustainable events in historic building that further research into the topic could be beneficial.

Another common trend identified by interviewees and reflected in previous studies [21] was the conflicting objectives of event managers and conservation teams. It is necessary for each department to compromise on their priorities in order to satisfy objectives, and ensure sustainable outcomes. Further challenges noted by interviewees were the wear and tear associated with increased footfall, meaning that event managers must ensure they achieve sufficient value from visitors to justify each event, and temperature control within rooms which have precious paintings and sculptures. The ideal temperature to preserve these artefacts is 11–21 degrees Celsius is the ideal humidity at 55–65% [9] which can be uncomfortable for event attendees, therefore a careful time balance must be reached whereby the temperature is brought to a comfortable level for visitors for a limited period of time before and during events. Hosting events in historic buildings requires compromises to be made by preservation teams, event managers and in some cases the event attendees, if the objective of preserving historic buildings is to be achieved as sustainably as possible.

5. Conclusions

The growth of event management operations within historic buildings has led to a number of complex management problems, including how these events can be managed sustainably. Little previous research has examined the role that events play in the sustainable management of heritage buildings. The standard models of sustainability within the visitor attractions and historic buildings management literature, tend to define sustainability using the Three E's model: Economic, environmental, and equity. This is also known as the 'three-legged stool', usually conceived of as encompassing the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability. This research agrees with previous authors who have identified the need to add more specific cultural aspects to these three part models. The consensus amongst interviewees in this research was that the educational work their historic buildings carry out in addition to holding events is considered to be closely related to culture, or cultural sustainability, in that they are sustaining the cultural aspects of their own institution. This research therefore adds to the emerging sustainable events management literature that has primarily dealt with sustainability in terms of environmental impacts. It also adds to the limited literature on the sustainability of events venues and an older body of work on the role of non-traditional income generating activity in historic buildings.

The key findings from this research were, firstly, that the mainstream events management literature does not adequately consider sustainability within events in historic building venues, or the holding of events within historic buildings in order to sustain and maintain the buildings. This topic requires further development in order for the sustainable management of historic buildings to advance. Secondly, that event managers within these venues have complex understandings of sustainability, which are more nuanced than the consideration given to sustainability in the events management literature. This is also something that should be investigated further, and academic literature regarding sustainability within event management made more readily available to practitioners.

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