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Clashing cultures – A systemic examination of onboard and destination cultures in cruise tourism

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Clashing Cultures – a systemic examination of on-board and destination cultures in cruise tourism

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Abstract

Cruise tourism has various social impacts on touristic destinations. In a long-term view, the current system will provoke counter movements if the rapid growth of the industry continues. Venice is a well-known example for social unsustainability due to cruise tourism. In which way are the single effects in Venice connected, and how do they affect each other? How could the problem be weakened without threatening a profitable business of cruise companies? The authors analysed the social impacts of cruise tourism in Venice in a design research process (APS). In the analysis phase (A), the soft systems thinking method "sensitivity modelling" was used in order to understand the system dependencies. One main finding was that the consumeristic on-board culture plays a central role for design interventions. Therefore, deeper analysis was conducted on the level of passenger experience on board cruise ships through the design research method "cultural probes". The engagement with the cultural identity of cruising first led to isolated concept ideas, which were then connected to a conceptual description of a utopian cruise in the projection phase (P). The described culture of cruising could be a starting point for creating micro-utopias as well as new and more sustainable business models (S).

Keywords

Soft systems thinking, design research, cruise tourism, sensitivity modelling, cultural identity

The Venice Case

Cruise tourism is a big issue in Venice. About 60.000 people live in Venice today, and the same number of tourists visit the city every day. There are up to 9 cruise ships in port at the same time, with a maximum of 12 in September 2013, which led to heavy overcrowding. An enormous infrastructure is needed for example for additional transportation, garbage collection and toilets. Locals are forced to move away from the city if they don't want to work in a hotel, a souvenir shop or as a gondolier. This leads to the problem that more and more local markets, schools and hospitals are closed, so that Venice is rapidly turning into a kind of Disneyland. Those enormous problems led to the situation that the Venetians started to organize demonstrations against cruise tourism (Pichler, 2012). Unsatisfied and demonstrating locals threaten the cruise business: If locals see tourists as invaders, the touristic experience will suffer sooner or later.

Although Venice is an extreme case, there are other cruise destinations that face problems from passenger pollution. Especially small destinations are effected, for example Key West in Florida (Klein, 2008), Vanuatu in the South Pacific (Niatu, 2007), and the Caribbean (Wood, 2000), for example South Belize (Placencia Chapter of the Belize Tourism Industry Association, 2013). The rapid growth of the cruise industry increases the problem (for example Brida and Zapata, 2010) so that one can assume that a lot more destinations will be affected in the future.

The aim of this study is to suggest improvements in terms of the social sustainability of cruise tourism. The problem is addressed by a process of research through design, in which a problem is analysed and handled through the practice of designing (Jonas, 2001).

Research Design and Methodology

The described social problem can be characterized as a "wicked problem" (Rittel and Webber, 1984). It is - for example - not possible to give a clear and complete formulation of the social impact of cruise tourism in Venice, possible solutions cannot be true or false, but rather good or bad, and there cannot be a final affirmation that the problem has been solved. Therefore, the problem and its context and influences will be addressed by soft systems thinking, using a method by Frederic Vester. In his book "The Art of Interconnected Thinking" (Vester 2011), which has been accepted as a report to the Club of Rome in 2002, he describes the approach of "sensitivity modelling". The tool helps to make design processes transparent and to communicate with different stakeholders about complex issues. It is not aiming to produce solutions, but to lead to a better understanding of the system and to a better problem definition among heterogeneous stakeholders.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the process that was followed in this case study. Vester's soft systems thinking tool was used for the analysis phase of the APS-design process (analysis-projection-synthesis) (Jonas, 2001) for gaining a general overview of the dependencies in the system. One specific variable, which has been identified as important, was further investigated by the design research method "cultural probes" in order to immerse deeper into user perspectives. Cultural probes, which were first introduced by Bill Gaver (1999), are small task packages that trigger people to give insights into their daily life. In order to derive detailed findings, they were complemented with qualitative interviews. The findings were displayed on a "map of socio-cultural relations", which helped to generate new, still disconnected, ideas for the projective phase. The work phase resulted in the narrative description of a preferred situation (Simon, 1994) on a systemic level, in which the target concept of social sustainability was addressed.
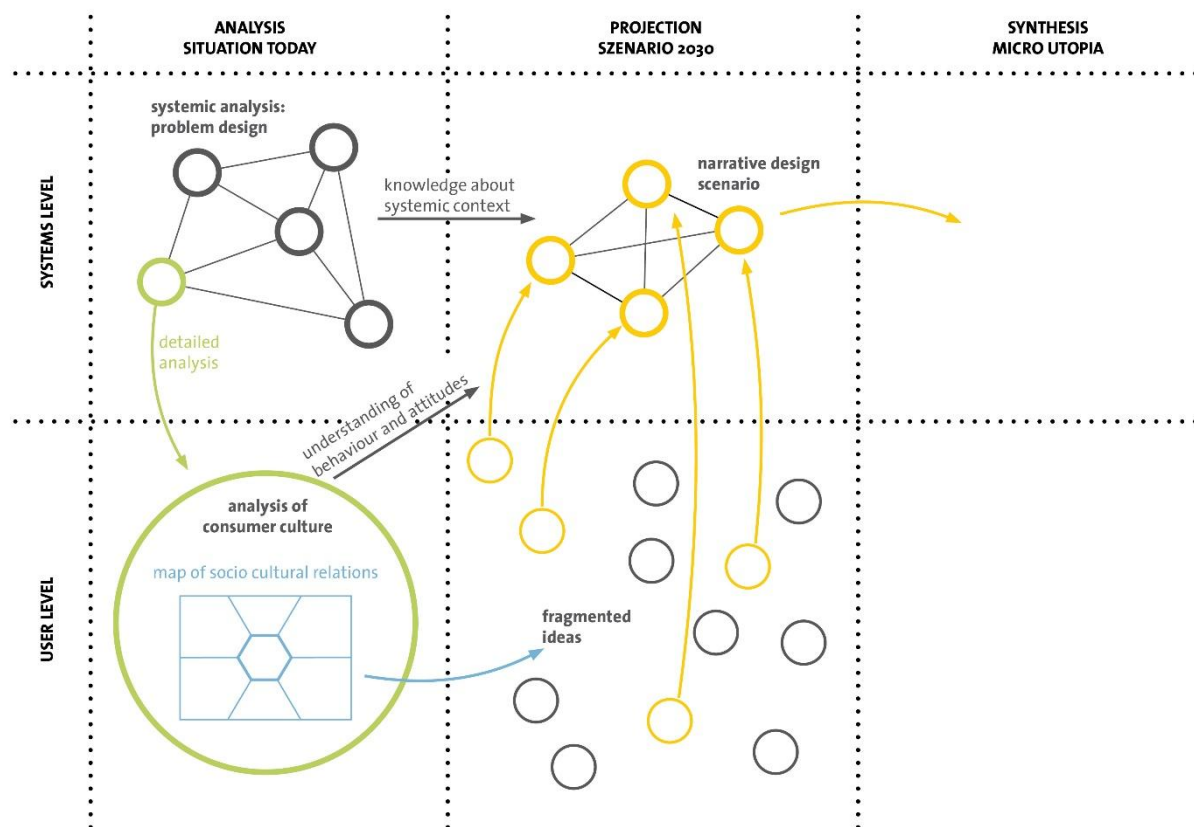

Figure 1   Process of the Venice case study

Sensitivity modelling at the example of cruise tourism in Venice

A first step of the method "sensitivity modelling" is to define few suitable variables that cover the relevant areas of living systems: network of stakeholders, economic and other activities, spatial

relations, human ecology, environmental conditions, communication infrastructures and inner order and culture. This way, most aspects will have been considered.

In the following cross impact analysis, the strength of the influence, which the variables have on each other has to be specified. The rating 0 indicates no influence, while the rating 3 indicates a strong influence. From this input, the program generates active and passive sums, which define the systemic roles of the variables. A high active sum shows that it has a strong influence on other variables, while a high passive sum means that the variable is influenced strongly by other variables (Figure 2).
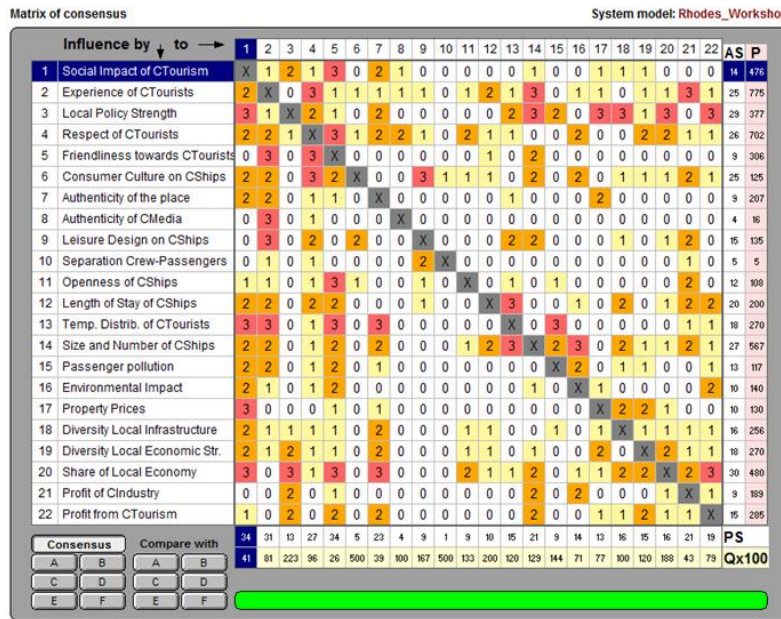
Matrix of consensus   System model: Rhodes_Workshop

Influence by ↓ to →	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	AS	P
1 Social Impact of CTourism	X	1	2	1	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	14	476
2 Experience of CTourists	2	X	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	2	1	3	0	1	1	0	1	1	3	1	25	775
3 Local Policy Strength	3	1	X	2	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	0	3	3	1	3	0	3	29	377
4 Respect of CTourists	2	2	1	X	3	1	2	2	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	1	1	26	702
5 Friendliness towards CTourists	0	3	0	3	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	306
6 Consumer Culture on CShips	2	2	0	3	2	X	0	0	3	1	1	1	0	2	0	2	0	1	1	1	2	1	25	125
7 Authenticity of the place	2	2	0	1	1	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	9	207
8 Authenticity of CMedia	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	16
9 Leisure Design on CShips	0	3	0	2	0	2	0	0	X	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	15	135
10 Separation Crew-Passengers	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	X	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	5
11 Openness of CShips	1	1	0	1	3	1	0	0	1	0	X	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	12	108
12 Length of Stay of CShips	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	X	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	2	2	2	20	200
13 Temp. Distrib. of CTourists	3	3	0	1	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	X	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	18	270
14 Size and Number of CShips	2	2	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	3	X	2	3	0	2	1	1	2	1	27	567
15 Passenger pollution	2	2	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	X	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	13	117
16 Environmental Impact	2	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	X	1	0	0	0	0	2	10	140
17 Property Prices	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	X	2	2	1	0	0	10	130
18 Diversity Local Infrastructure	2	1	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	X	1	1	1	1	16	256
19 Diversity Local Economic Str.	2	1	2	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	X	2	1	1	18	270
20 Share of Local Economy	3	0	3	1	3	0	3	0	0	0	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	X	2	3	30	480
21 Profit of CIndustry	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	X	1	9	43
22 Profit from CTourism	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	2	1	1	X	15	285
PS	34	31	13	27	34	5	23	4	9	1	9	10	15	21	9	14	13	16	15	16	21	19	PS	
Qx100	41	81	223	96	26	500	39	100	167	500	133	200	120	129	144	71	77	100	120	188	43	79	Qx100	

Consensus   Compare with   A B A B   C D C D   E F E F

Figure 2 Cross impact analysis

Those systemic roles are shown in a diagram in which the active sum is put on the vertical axis and the passive sum is put on the horizontal axis (Figure 3). If variables move closer to the upper left corner, they are active ones, which means that they can be used as leverage points in order to activate change and stabilize the system. The upper right corner shows variables of a critical nature, which means that they are active and reactive (passive) at the same time, so that their development is difficult to predict. Reactive variables in the lower right corner are not useful for interventions to initiate change, but they can well indicate the state of the system. Intervention into buffering variables in the lower left corner is more or less useless.
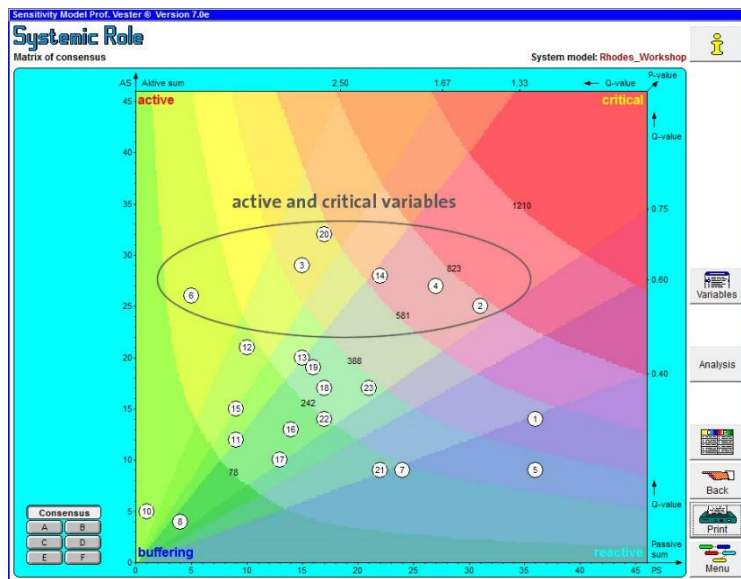
Figure 3   Systemic roles of the variables

Especially the active and critical variables are interesting to make design interventions in a system, which means for the Venice case that the following variables play an important role. Each of them is defined within a given range between "bad" and "good". Of course the designation of a variable as "good" or "bad" is a value decision based upon the specific motivation and purpose of the stakeholders, which guide the design process:

- Variable 6: "Consumer culture on cruise ships": It can be low standard, if there is consumerism, "all you can eat" culture, and mainly quantitative notions of luxury, or it can be high standard, if there are more cultivated and conscious consumption patterns and qualitative notions of luxury.

- Variable 3: The "Local policy strength" can be low, if politicians are under strong influence from diverse lobby groups or it can be high, if there is a strong will and legitimacy to decide for the best of the entire community.

- Variable 20: The "share of local economy" compared to the total income from cruise tourism can be low or high.

- Variable 14: "The size and number of cruise ships": It can be small and few or big and many. As outlined in the introduction, often the number of people and their distribution leads to major problems in destinations.

- Variable 4: "The respect of cruise tourists": It can be low, if they consider the destination as a consumable commodity, and if they act as bargain hunters. It can be high, if they respect the local culture and behave as respectful guests.

5

- Variable 2: "The experience of cruise tourists": It can be bad, if they experience hostility and stress, or it can be good if they feel as guests.

As mentioned before, reactive variables indicate the state of the system. In the Venice system, the quality of life in the destination (1) and the friendliness of locals towards cruise tourists (5) are identified as reactive variables, which means that the demonstrations of the Venetians and the high numbers of people moving away are a warning signal of an unbalanced system.

After performing the cross impact analysis, an effect system can be established. Reinforcing effects (continuous arrows) and counter-effects (dotted arrows) are defined (Figure 4). In this example, only the strongest effects that have previously been rated with a 3 were taken into account and connected. Other than in the tool's original version, the variables in the effect system are visualized by photographs. This way, the emotion and idea of each variable is transported, rather than just a linguistic concept.
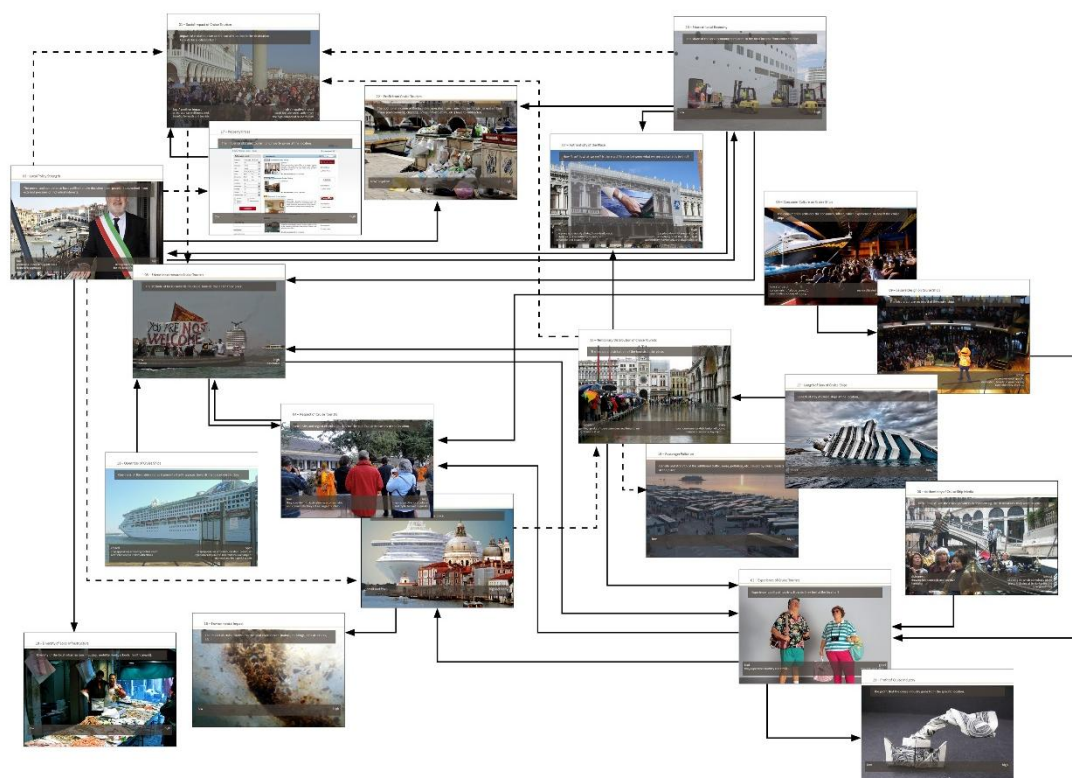

Figure 4   Effect system of the Venice case

Feedback Analysis of the Venice system

The effect system (Figure 4) allows a detailed analysis of the design system and the identification of feedback loops, which gives hints regarding the internal dynamics of the system. One specific

feedback loop is extracted in Figure 5 (red arrows) and can be described as follows: If the friendliness of the locals towards cruise tourists increases, the experience of the tourists gets better, which means that they feel more like guests. If the tourists feel like guests, their respect towards locals will rise, and this again leads to friendlier locals. This self-reinforcing feedback loop can either intensify to the positive or to the negative. If the system can be influenced so that it intensifies to the positive, it describes one possibility of how more acceptance by the locals and therefore more social sustainability can be achieved.

At this point, systems thinking and design were related by focusing especially on those variables with a direct influence on this loop and which were possible to be changed by design (green arrows): The "openness of cruise ships" towards people of the destination, the "consumer culture on cruise ships", which is closely connected with the "leisure design on cruise ships", and the "authenticity of the cruise ship media".
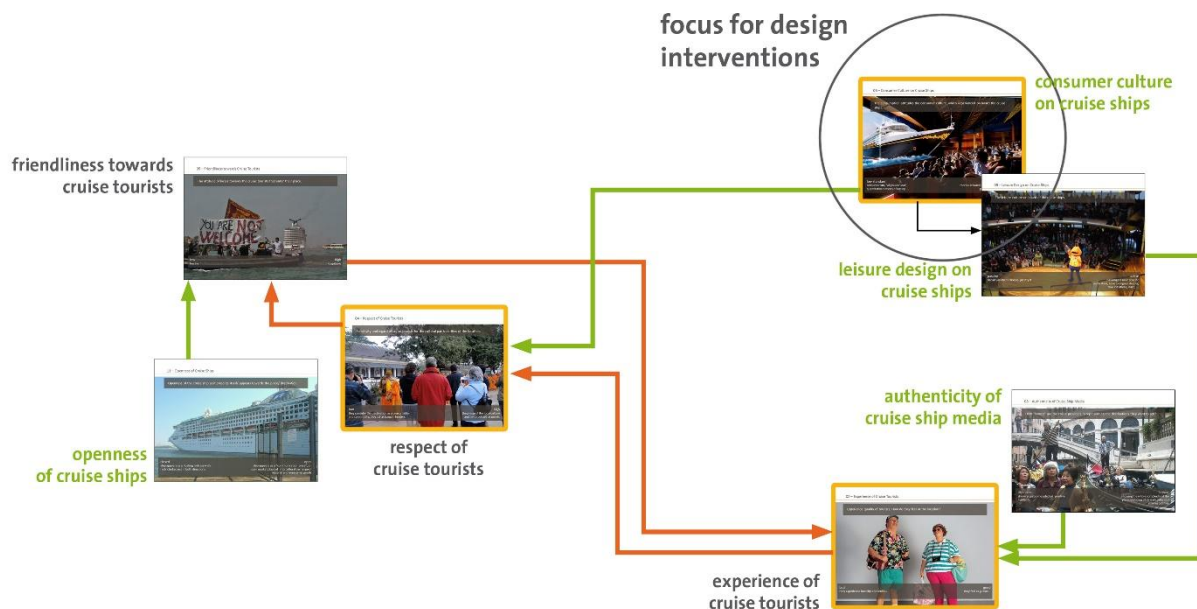
Figure 5   Feedback loop (red arrows) and variables with a direct influence on this loop (green arrows)

The "consumer culture on cruise ships" was identified as a variable that plays an active role and was therefore focused on for design interventions. The variable describes how people behave on board and in which way they consume. Typical cruise ships are producing luxury through plenty of high quality food, excellent service, plenty of space in the cabin, and professional entertainment shows. This creates an on-board culture that is shaped by consumeristic intentions and attitudes. This on-board culture of consumerism – this is the hypothesis - has a strong effect on the way that cruise tourists will encounter locals in the respective destinations. The relation is indicated by the green arrow in the feedback loop, which points to the variable "respect of cruise tourists" (Figure 5).

If the cruise ship is conceived as a microcosm in which people are strictly separated from the outside for a certain period of time, one can say that their own subculture develops. Vogel (2004) described this subculture by the metaphor of a protective cocoon (through the gigantic and steely appearance of the ship), an emotional cocoon (stimulated by the rather homogenous community on board as well as by symbols in forms of logos, colours and merchandising products) and a cocoon that is reducing complexity (through clearly defined rules and the ship's autonomy). In contrast to locally grown subcultures, the subculture on board is a result of the ship design in the broadest sense rather than a product of the people, which means that on a cruise ship, passengers adopt the (consumeristic) culture that the cruise ship design offers. In return this means that if the ship design is changed, also the on-board culture will change.

## Zooming into the variable "consumer culture on cruise ships"

Following the overall systemic examination, cultural probes were used to gain a deeper knowledge about the on-board culture and to dive into the user perspective. The participants took a "logbook" on their cruise, which included different questions and tasks (Figure 6).

Figure 6   cultural probes

The return of the probes gave interesting hints that couldn't be completely understood without additional information. That is why they were used as a basis for ensuing qualitative interviews with the participants. The interpretations of the probes, quotations from the interviews and photographs provided rich qualitative material that was further clustered. Six characteristic aspects of an onboard culture have been defined: Ways of socializing, ways of housing, ways of working and learning, ways of dining, ways of recreation and ways of travelling. The phrasing "ways of" is used to especially emphasize the possibilities of doing things differently.

The qualitative material was matched to the aspects of the cultural identity and led to a "map of socio-cultural relations" (Figure 7), which was used as a source of inspiration since each proposition that is mentioned on the map can possibly be changed into something else. In this case AIDA, which is a very popular cruise ship company in Germany, has been taken as an example.
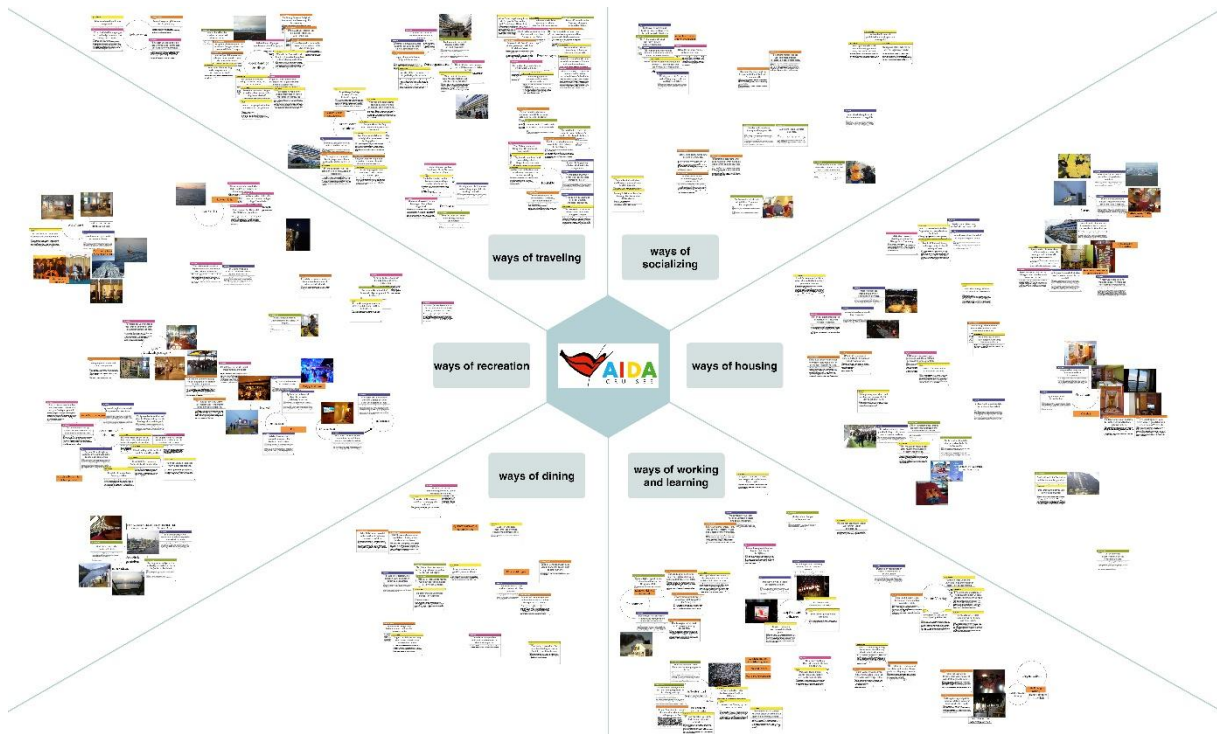
Figure 7   Map of socio-cultural relations

Using the map as an inspirational tool, the level of innovation is depending a lot on the kind of propositions that are highlighted. As a culture only gets describable when it is compared to a different culture (Herdin and Luger 2008), the degree of innovation that is reached is depending on the compared culture. Comparing the on-board culture to other cruise cultures, innovations on the level of a different restaurant-style, and on other ideas for on-board entertainment will be produced. Comparing it for example to a holiday on the farm, the necessity of restaurants and entertainment might be questioned. And comparing it to the everyday culture of a specific country, the difference between a holiday culture and working culture gets obvious, so that as a result, possibilities to work on board might be integrated.
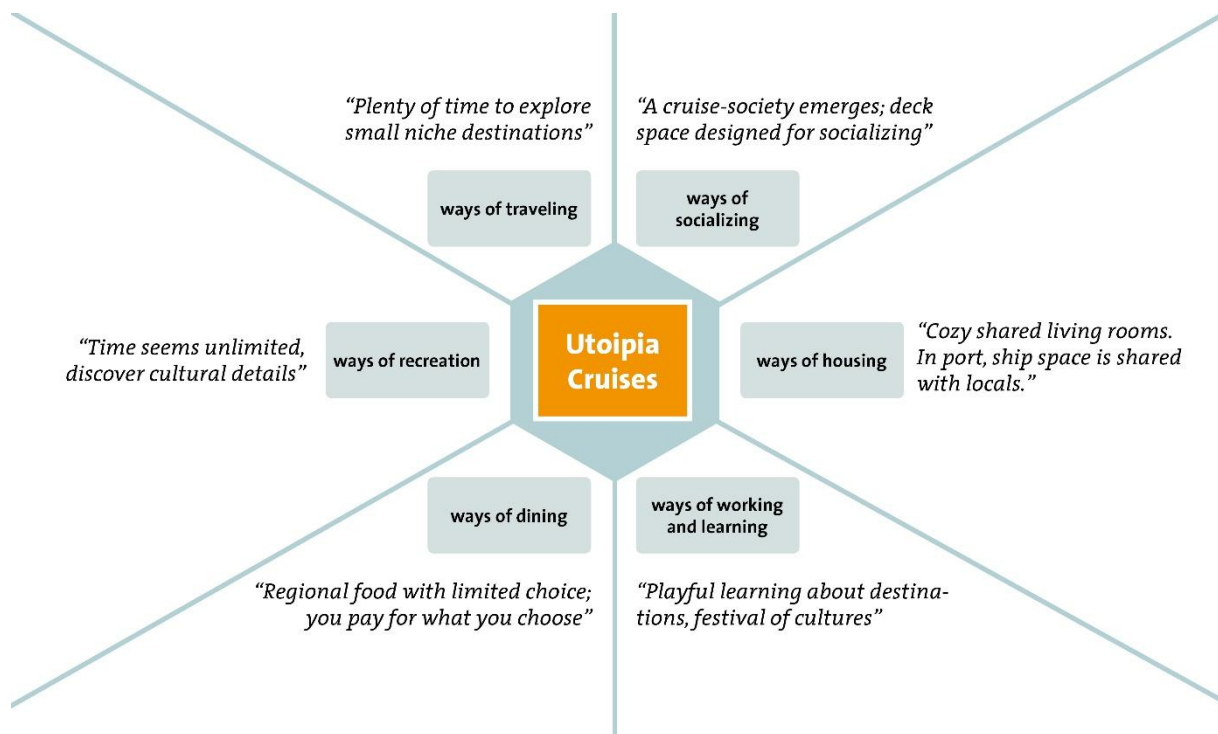
Design interventions – Utopia Cruises

Throughout the process, the map inspired to initially isolated design ideas and solutions that described new ways of travelling. In order to give examples of how the solutions formed, some

aspects of the AIDA culture have been extracted (Figure 8): The way of housing can be described by modern, colourful housing for 2000 demanding individuals. The ship protects them from the outside. Passengers are in a holiday-mode and are offered few out-of-date learning opportunities like TV documentaries and lectures. The way of dining got the title "nonstop all-you-can-eat-delicacies". For recreation, there is a countless variety of splendid and sparkling entertainment, contrasting calm, relaxing and cost-intensive beauty oasis. The way of traveling is characterized by daily changing destination highlights. Emphasis is put on the privacy of travel partners who might socialize on events.

Figure 8   Cultural identity of AIDA cruises

Starting from this description, a design scenario was developed for "Utopia Cruises" (Figure 9). Of course, also the knowledge gained from the system analysis was highly relevant for designing the scenario: The way of housing is dominated by cosy shared living rooms. The private cabins play a less important role. In port, ship space is shared with locals, they are invited on board. One main activity is playful learning about destinations, in direct communication with locals. It can be called a festival of cultures. The supply chains of products are short and transparent, but regionalism brings with it limited choice. Passengers pay for what they get. Recreation is equalized with unlimited time to discover cultural details. To provide this, there is plenty of time to explore the small niche destinations. During the journey, a cruise community emerges, which becomes symbolically visible in the wide deck space, which is designed for socializing.

"Plenty of time to explore
small niche destinations"

"A cruise-society emerges; deck
space designed for socializing"

ways of traveling

ways of
socializing

"Time seems unlimited,
discover cultural details"

ways of recreation

**Utoipia
Cruises**

ways of housing

"Cozy shared living rooms.
In port, ship space is shared
with locals."

ways of dining

ways of working
and learning

"Regional food with limited choice;
you pay for what you choose"

"Playful learning about destina-
tions, festival of cultures"

Figure 9   Cultural identity of "Utopia Cruises"

This short description marks the framework for a narrative user scenario in which future passengers travel on a utopia cruise.

Conclusions and further proceedings

The case study of the social implications of cruise tourism in Venice combined an analytical systems thinking process with a user-centered design process. It became obvious that the social impacts of cruise tourism harm the current system in the long term. The quality of life in destinations and the friendliness of locals towards tourists were identified as crucial indicators for the state of the system. The clash of cultures in Venice between tourists and locals mainly doesn't result from cultural misunderstandings, but rather from the commercial system itself. The system analysis showed, that intervening into the consumer culture on board cruise ships is a promising option to tackle the problem from the scope of cruise companies. The suggested design solution of a newly-created cultural identity on board ("Utopia Cruises") opens up possibilities for cruise companies to enter into new and more sustainable business strategies. This is important since currently, cruise companies are stuck with their business model. Because many cruise offers resemble each other, one widespread practice is to keep the operating costs as low as possible (e.g. with cheap labour) in order to be able to offer low prices to the customers. To make profit, companies increase the sales on board as much as possible (Gross and Lück, 2012; Cruise Market Watch, 2014). This is how the consumeristic culture on cruise ships developed, which in the end interferes with the touristic experience ashore. Verganti

(2009) says that to escape from this spiral of competition, one main aspect of innovation is to create new meaning. The vision of "Utopia Cruises" points into the direction of giving cruising various new meanings, and on this basis, new business models can be developed.

There might be the objection, that through additional new business models, even more cruisers come to a destination because a different target groups will be attracted. This could lead to more unsustainability and intensify the problem. The consequences of changes in a system must be taken seriously, because the nature of wicked problems is that there is no test of an interference and that the waves of consequences have no restraint (Rittel and Webber, 1984). Another possible development could be that destinations notice that they can make much more profit per passenger with smaller cruise ships that have a less consumeristic on-board culture because the tourists have more money left to spend in a destination. Already, the mega-ships tend to develop more and more into destinations themselves (Wood, 2000). It is possible that in the future, large cruise ships only stop in very few places. Coexisting with the big ships there could be cruising with small vessels that put the shore leave and cultural aspects into the centre of attention. It is not possible to stop cruise tourism because the desire for voyages by ship will remain, but it could be transferred into having a (socially, environmentally and economically) sustainable nature.

The framing of "Utopia Cruises" sets a starting point for designing a micro-utopia (Wood, 2007). A micro-utopia has to be developed for a specific situation and cannot work in all places of the world. Cruise tourism has a very special and quite extreme community, but maybe this is why especially cruise ships could be an ideal testing field for future ways of touristic traveling. On a ship, passengers and crew are separated from the outside for a certain period of time, and they develop their own culture, so that micro-utopias could be tested almost under laboratory conditions.

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