



## DEVELOPING A MICRO CLUSTER MODEL FOR SUBURBAN TOURISM: THE CASE OF WEKERLE ESTATE, BUDAPEST

Brigitta Pécssek<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract:** *This research shifts the focus to suburban tourism within the context of urban tourism thus making metropolitan areas less congested and showcasing urban authenticity for tourists. It proposes a micro cluster model for suburban tourism and illustrates its applicability in a suburb of Budapest called Wekerle Estate. The suburb was developed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by adopting the garden city concept and still boasts a lively community. However, it needs a framework to embrace tourism in a sustainable way. The qualitative research uses the ethnographic method to explore what Wekerle Estate offers for tourists and where its weaknesses are in terms of hospitality. Based on the findings a micro cluster model is prepared in this study and it gives recommendations for Wekerle Estate to evolve as an authentic tourist destination. This paper contributes to the research of suburbs from the urban tourism angle that has so far been neglected in the field of tourism.*

**Keywords:** *Suburban tourism, Micro cluster model, Urban tourism.*

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✉ [pecsek.brigitta@uni-eszterhazy.hu](mailto:pecsek.brigitta@uni-eszterhazy.hu)

<sup>1</sup> Eszterházy Károly Catholic University; Eger, 3300, Egészségház utca 4. Hungary



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urban spaces are the biggest drawcards in global tourism, and generate substantial revenue for stakeholders, therefore, drastic measures of decreasing tourists could hurt many parties involved as indicated in the City Performance Research, in which the tourism performance of 15 global cities was analyzed (UNWTO 2022). The post-pandemic period is the ideal time to rethink modern travel patterns, moving towards more localized and small-scale offerings. In metropolitan areas overtourism and undertourism are experienced simultaneously, causing the same problems and repercussions: deteriorating quality of life, frustrated residents, and outmigration of locals. In contrast, unique suburbs were overlooked as tourist destinations, although they offer green zones, authenticity, and local culture. As Maitland (2019) puts it discussing London: the Real London (suburb) versus the Brand London (centre).

The reason for the little analytical attention paid to suburban tourism according to Vaughan et al. (2009) and Phelps (2012) is that social scholars do not consider the topic worth exploring. For instance, Florida (2005) contrasts the bohemian population of the inner districts with the non-creative suburban people. However, Wekerle Estate offers an authentic experience, with diverse types of housing (detached houses, blocks of units of different sizes), efficient local amenities, and good access to the city center. It has been around for over a century, evidence of the viability of the garden city concept worked out by Howard. With the analysis of the literature and fieldwork, the study prepares a micro cluster model for garden cities/suburbs, taking the example of Wekerle Estate.

## 2. CLUSTERS AND MICRO CLUSTERS IN TOURISM

According to Porter (2000, p.16), “cluster is a geographically proximate group of interconnected companies and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities”. Porter himself acknowledges the possibility of different geographical scales: “Clusters are a striking feature of virtually every national, regional, state, and every metropolitan economy” (Porter, 1998, p. 78), admitting that “Clusters occur in many types of industries, in smaller fields, and even in some local industries such as restaurants, car dealers, and antique shops”. Motoyama (2008) criticizes regional competitiveness and specialization in the cluster theory, claiming that regions do not have their own will as companies do, and finding niche markets can also be an oxymoron associated with regional development. The area of Manhattan is also a perfect example of local clusters, boasting at least two of them: media and financial clusters. So, clustering can take place even within five miles (Currid & Connolly, 2008; Funderburg & Boarnet, 2008; Rosenthal & Strange, 2003).

It does not mean that regional clusters do not apply to tourism products. Globally, some examples such as IDM Südtirol cluster, Tuscany wine region cluster, or Andalusia tourism cluster successfully emerged in the 2010s, linking a wide range of stakeholders regionwide. However, they are at the early stage to assess their performance. In Hungary, out of the 28 accredited clusters only one, the Thermal–Health Industry Cluster deals with tourism (Klaszterfejlesztés, 2022). As health tourism is a key mass product, and spa resorts are scattered all around the country, the good practices of this particular cluster would not be easily adaptable to the development of different tourism products. Not to mention the fact, that Hungarian regions did not evolve in an organic way, but three counties were put together during the transition to the market economy.

Unlike other products offered by manufacturing or service companies, tourism products are heterogeneous, thus they are complex and consist of different complementary components provided

by suppliers from various public and private sectors (Kachniewska, 2013; Lade, 2010). It is deeply rooted in locality, consequently, no plan can be realized disregarding the natural environment, the built heritage, and the will of the local communities.

When it comes to the theory of micro clusters in tourism, it was first conceptualized with regard to rural areas to help develop niche tourism (Grimstad & Burgess, 2013; Michael, 2007; Sigurðardóttir & Steinthorsson, 2018). The purpose of tourism clusters is to highlight the activities at a destination or region and to get SMEs to cooperate and develop tourism offerings in the locality (Novelli et al., 2006). Michael (2007, p. 33) defines micro clusters “as a development mechanism that fosters the ability to build a local level of specialization and competitive advantages for a small tourism destination”. Ferreira and Esteveao (2009) state that a tourism cluster is a geographic concentration of companies and institutions interconnected in tourism activities.

This approach takes an important principle of the regional cluster theory on board, namely the multiplier effect. Michael (2007) notes that the novelty comes from the fact that local developments are not realized according to the often-used patterns, but they are executed in a more holistic way under the radar of the local community. Grimstad and Burgess (2013) highlights that micro clusters can operate efficiently in towns where most business ventures are family-owned, and the norms of the local community protect them from “commercialism” and from the negative impacts of political decisions. These close-knit communities thrive on cooperation and trust, where it is important to negotiate between priorities such as workplace protection, infrastructural developments, and financial viability (Salvador et al., 2010). Niche tourism services, such as equestrian tourism are examples of tourism products developed within the frame of micro-clusters and marketed for selected target groups (Salvador et al., 2010; Sigurðardóttir & Steinthorsson, 2018).

### 3. GARDEN CITIES, GARDEN SUBURBS, GARDEN VILLAGES

As Lineberry (1975) argued despite the extensive literature on suburbia, we are no closer than ever to a unified concept. Taking London as an example, Phelps (2012) points out that its suburbs are disparate and varied in their character: they can be residential or industrial, while others boast a mix of small businesses and housing. The latter category includes suburbs with good infrastructure and small villages as well attached to the metropolitan, where small businesses operating in the creative industry can thrive and there is a short commute to city offices. These communities attract small business owners who provide quality products and services and who are not willing to pay high rent in city areas. These enterprises increase the service density and quality in outer areas, while the retail sector becomes more homogeneous in the city because global chain retailers fill the void of independent retailers. Maitland (2019) argues that many creative businesses leave the city due to countless factors and not solely on economic considerations.

The garden city movement started at the end of the 1900s has many similarities with the modern citta slow movement initiated and developed by Petrini in the 1980s. Although Howard was not looking for answers for the suburbs, most garden cities have become part of the greater metropolitan areas over the decades, therefore many suburbs today used to be independent small towns in the past. The principles of the brit movement are summarised in Garden Cities of Tomorrow originally published in 1902 (Howard, 2009):

- antidote to dormitory cities, self-contained communities including residential, industrial, and agricultural areas surrounded by parks;
- ideal population: around 30 000;
- the rural environment with services of city qualities;

- provides opportunities for the local economy;
- built with private capital.

When looking for historic examples, Letchworth has to be mentioned as the first garden city situated 34 miles from London and Hampstead as the first garden suburb, both planned and built in the United Kingdom at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many more followed suit, such as Brentham and Welwyn. Later on, garden villages were also created, therefore, the Garden City and Town Planning Association clarified the concept in 1919 and defined garden village/garden suburb as follows: “Garden village is a small scale garden city that depends on a nearby city for its supply of water, power etc., while in the garden suburb the healthy conditions are provided for the natural growth of the city in the spirit of garden city planning” (Nagy & Szelényi 2008, p. 80).

In Hungary several cities (Győr, Ózd, Miskolc) and Budapest have neighborhoods like garden cities, however, the only functioning, coherent statement, remaining popular for residents nowadays is Wekerle Estate. Some suffered from the disappearance of local industries, or modern blocks of flats destroyed the landscape, in other cases the homes were too small to satisfy the needs of modern dwellers.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research used a qualitative “tool kit”: fieldwork with observation mixed with autoethnographic vignettes. Fieldwork was realized on three different occasions in 2022 and 2023, focusing on the following issues:

- Visitor management: access to information (maps, promotional materials) at different times and locations;
- Quality and density of services: the presence of local gastronomy;
- Culture: the presence of local artists, artisans, and local art.

No quantitative research was carried out at that stage due to the novelty of the topic and the lack of conceptualization of suburban tourism. This research aimed to propose an enhanced theory of the cluster model in order to contribute to the conceptualization of suburban tourism. The research site is tucked in Budapest’s 19<sup>th</sup> district known as Kispest, formerly a separate town that was administratively attached to Budapest in 1950 along with several other settlements located on the outskirts of Budapest. Wekerle Estate was named after Sándor Wekerle, the Hungarian prime minister in 1908, who initiated and supported the garden city project financially. The financial backing coming from the state was the only main difference from Howard’s original idea. The residents came from the countryside and the pint-sized town provided them with the simple side of city life, achieving a symbiosis between architecture and the natural environment (Figure 1).

Constructions were underway between 1908 and 1925, loyal to the poetic understanding of the Transylvanian heritage. The one-story homes contained 2, 3, or 4 units, while the two-story buildings had 6, 8, or 12 apartments, and the villas with larger apartments used to house the headmaster’s or doctor’s family. Fifty thousand trees were planted, mainly along the spacious avenues. In 1917 redcurrant harvest was so rich that renters could earn almost four times the yearly rent by selling their fruits. Main characteristics of Wekerle Estate in the 1920s:

- garden city habitat;
- covers 1.7km<sup>2</sup>;
- population: 22 000;
- one or two-story houses, ranging from duplexes to 12-flat apartment houses;
- 40 different types of residential buildings were designed;

- 1007 buildings with 4412 units;
- all designs followed the “Transylvanian style” established by Károly Kós;
- spacious gardens and street layout with tree-lined avenues;
- residents were the employees of MÁV factory;
- until 1950 an independent town.



**Figure 1.** Aerial view of Wekerle Estate

**Source:** [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wekerle\\_Estate#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Wekerle\\_Estate,Budapest\\_-\\_l%C3%A9gi\\_fot%C3%B3.jpg](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wekerle_Estate#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Wekerle_Estate,Budapest_-_l%C3%A9gi_fot%C3%B3.jpg)



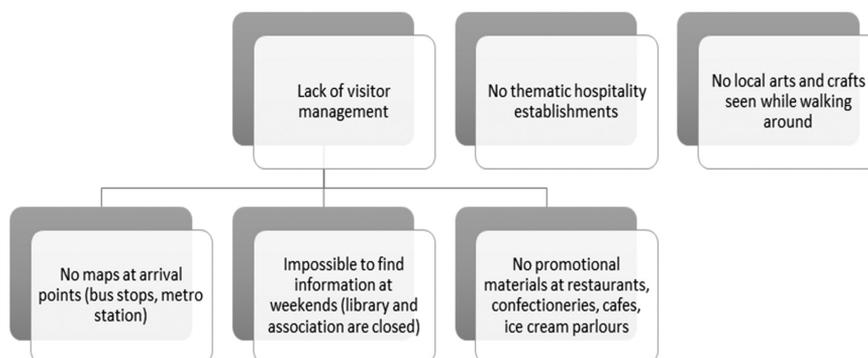
**Figure 2.** Examples of residential buildings

**Source:** Own photos, 2022

As seen in Figure 2, the architecture of Wekerle Estate is a Hungarian folk interpretation of the Art Deco style adding to the appeal of the neighborhood. The heritage buildings are all functional, residential buildings, civic buildings, or commercial shops. So, visitors can have a multitude of experiences, apart from experiencing a liveable district, they also see an example of a heritage district surviving through political and economic changes and preserving its authenticity and popularity. The area is a tribute to the architect, Károly Kós. Besides the original buildings, a great number of detached houses are also available in the outer circle for those who prefer more country-style living arrangements. Civic buildings and shops are also accessible and scattered around the neighborhood.

## 5. RESULTS

The field research included the participation of several organized walks, visiting restaurants and cafés, and looking into some individual homes. A series of shortcomings were detected, which are illustrated in Figure 3. The key issue is the lack of visitor management. For instance, no information was available on weekends for individual visitors since both the office of the local civic association (Wekerle Társaskör Egyesület) and the library were closed, so visitors were left to their own devices. With a little more attention leaflets and brochures could have been stocked in the book exchange booth.



**Figure 3.** Results of fieldwork

**Source:** Own research, 2022

In the case of eateries, the emblematic Wekerle restaurant is only open on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Local gastronomic creations such as signature dishes and drinks were missing from the menus. The interiors do not reflect locality, no local arts and crafts were on display, nor was any information available about the neighborhood inside. The empty neighborhood revealed a non-existent tourism industry, and the closed hospitality businesses and restricted working hours can signal job losses in the future.

However, organized walks are available and can be divided into regular walks and seasonal walks. In 2022 the following walking tours were offered (Wekerle Társaskör Egyesület, 2022):

General walks:

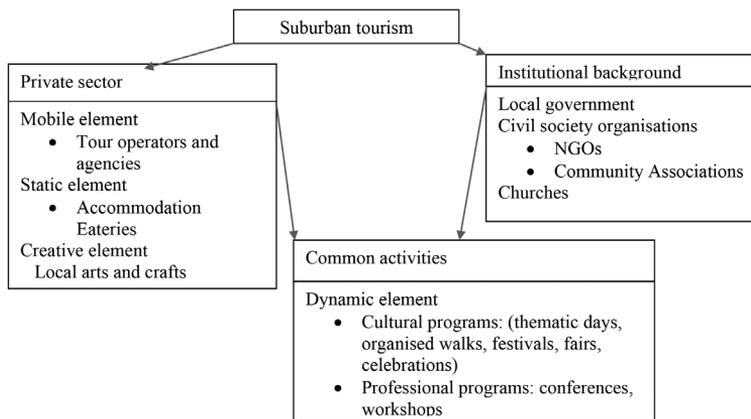
- Dolce Vita among the redcurrant bush – snapshots from the last century;
- Walk at twilight (wells, fountains, fire hydrants, and artesian wells);
- Idea and reality: Wekerle Estate;
- Garden city stories;
- Károly Kós and the Youngst;
- On horse-drawn carriage around Wekerle Estate;
- Past, present, future – journey through time around the 110-year-old Wekerle Estate;
- Private, group walk in Wekerle Estate;
- Wekerle, from cellars to attic.

Seasonal walks:

- Walk on garage sale day;
- Walk on St. Patrick's Day;
- Walk to bury winter;
- Walk on Valentine's Day.

### 5.1. The Micro Cluster Model for Suburban Tourism

Based on the field research the micro cluster concept of Costa (2005) was extended (Figure 4) and arranged into a flowing model in Figure 4:



**Figure 4.** The micro cluster model for tourism

**Source:** Own research

#### Private sector

*Mobile element:* It can be based either locally or outside, including tour operators and agents who organize, promote, and sell tourism services. To offer a carefully designed palette of services, it is important to work together with civil society and cooperate in terms of themes and pricing to avoid the duplication of services. Programs offered for free by civil society should not harm the bottom line and should consider the carrying capacity of the area.

*Static element:* As for the accommodation choice, the outside and the inside of the buildings should be injected with a sense of local vernacular. Family-run hotels and guesthouses should be favored because they can better meet the criteria of sustainability than chain hotels. The gastronomic offerings can be a decisive factor and result in a higher satisfaction rate (Pécsek, 2014). Eateries can be physically attached to accommodation, so a more complex package would await visitors, generating a steadier flow of income for small businesses.

*Creative element:* cultural and creative products are deeply rooted in the localities where they have been created –inspired by local symbols, traditions, knowledge, materials, and practices – they become a vital, powerful site-specific resource for territorial development (Daubeuf et al., 2019). Involving local artists in the creation of tourism services means that visitors encounter local culture at every step of their visit, inside the accommodations, restaurants, and confectionaries filled with the artful display of locally sourced arts, crafts, and homeware. By designing creative programs, a more sophisticated and demanding returning clientele can be built up and satisfied.

#### Institutional background

In order to design attractive events a diverse institutional background is paramount, where the local government ensures the legal background, and the financial backing and pursues a lobbying activity along with a wide range of civil organizations. The involvement of the latter in the

development and promotion is necessary to keep the size of the events at bay and ensure a direct community voice. Churches do not just offer spiritual guidance but social and voluntary work, education, healthcare, and social care as well as they are architectural attractions.

### Common activities

*Dynamic element:* The two main components: the private sector and the institutions have to cooperate in the creation of programs to satisfy both locals' and visitors' needs and raise the attention of potential tourists. The dynamic element covers a non-exhaustive list of activities that can vary based on the resources and objectives of the given settlement. The consensus in the decision-making as well as in the whole creative process is pivotal since the everyday of locals are exposed to strangers who only have a limited timeframe to explore and experience. Therefore, locals have to be careful and aware of how they want to show off their lives. Apart from leisure tourists, a niche type of business tourism should be developed including organizing small conferences and workshops thematically keeping in line with the neighborhood.

## 6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This is a conceptual paper building a model to illustrate a relationship between the cluster theory and suburban tourism. The study has a creative scope; however, it also has data limitations due to the novelty of the topic. In the future, research can take the path of focusing on modern suburb development considering all its challenges related to city tourism. Researchers can also investigate ways of incorporating special interest tourism such as architectural tourism and/or green tourism products into their suburban tourism analysis.

Regarding this actual research, it will be important to carry out a survey in the local community to find out their attitude towards sustainable tourism developments. The result of the questionnaire would clearly show whether residents would be willing to embrace tourism or have different ideas when it comes to sustainable development.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the fieldwork and the elements of the micro cluster model the following points are suggested to be incorporated into the development strategy:

*Focus:* Crafting and promoting slow and experience-based activities (eating, drinking, walking) based on the synergies of heritage architecture, artisanal culture, and nature.

*Accommodation:* Creating non-replicable offerings such as lifestyle guesthouses and mini-hotels by salvaging old edifices and revamping them. New developments from scratch should be discouraged to leave the extensive green environment intact and keep the space intimate.

*Gastronomy:* Opening hours should be addressed. A complete overhaul of the menus is needed in most establishments. With the help of local chefs and pastry cooks a flagship dish, cake, and drink (the wine or beer of the estate) should be created.

*Art:* The sense of the place can be enjoyed and shared in a more intensive way by the direct involvement of local artists who could welcome art lovers at their artists' colonies where they could make products together by hand. Photo tours have been a long part of the niche offerings in

tourism, while the painting experience has been a recent phenomenon as a healing and recreational artistic activity. The major advantage of a painting course would be the outdoor setting with a remarkable architectural backdrop. Open competitions like „The Four Seasons in Wekerle” would ensure repeat visitation throughout the year. Interiors of tourism establishments should make a connection with the locality through arts and crafts (ceramics, photos, textiles, paintings).

*Cultural programs:* it is not advisable to boost the number of cultural programs catering to visitors as they would attract fast, mass tourists to the neighborhood. However, an e-guide application downloadable from the Internet would allow flexible consumption of place. Furthermore, multi-lingual walks would open a new horizon to the life of Wekerle Estate since foreign professionals such as architects, historians, art historians, urbanists and photographers would find tailored programs appealing.

*Convention tourism:* workshops and mini-conferences related to the „sense of place” would enrich the palette of offerings with a profitable product.

As a result, the downtown and the suburbs in Budapest can mutually benefit because tourists can experience everyday exoticism without leaving the city. Simultaneously, the inner districts have to cope with fewer tourists, making crowd management easier. In the long run, even a more sophisticated tourist segment might take an interest in the city.

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