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A Comparative Study for Eco lodges Architecture to Brand Position Wellness Destinations in Egypt

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Abstract

This research aims to identify the architectural features of Baharyia Oasis in Egypt to promote the wellness potentials of the destination through developing an eco-lodge architectural image using a brand positioning strategy. The study adopts a comparative methodology to evaluate the architectural elements of Qaser el Bawiti in Baharyia Oasis, Egypt, and Banasura Hills in Kerala, India. As a result, the study proposes a brand positioning strategy for wellness eco-lodges using the architectural identity of the destination.

Keywords: Eco-lodge Architecture; Brand Positioning; Wellness; Baharyia Oasis

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1.0 Introduction

Traveling aims to maintain the holistic health of visitors by providing sustainable hospitality services. Therefore, researchers predicted a demand increase for wellness practices, which affects the world's national economic rate to reach \$7.0 trillion in 2025, after a period of strong market growth from \$4.3 trillion in 2017 to \$4.9 trillion in 2019. (Global Wellness Institute, 2021) Accordingly, the eco-lodge industry is expanding rapidly due to its distinctive architecture and unique hospitality experiences, which affects the competitiveness and attractiveness of the wellness tourist image. (Dini & Pencarelli, 2021) The architectural features of eco-lodges present destination cultural values, preserve wellness resources, and enhance the connection between nature and people, which affect visitors' perceptions and their travel decision. (Wang & Lin, 2021)

Egypt is considered one of the wealthiest countries, with wellness resources and a unique identity. However, its international recognition as a wellness destination is limited. Baharyia Oasis is one of the most significant wellness destinations in Egypt. It is characterized by its therapeutic climate; thermal, mineral, and sulfur springs; and healing plants, aside from its distinctive identity and unique architectural features. These resources can help in the recovery process of bones, skin, kidneys, and breathing diseases. (Information and Decision Support Center, 2020) However, a few eco-lodges in Baharyia Oasis use their architectural elements to reflect their wellness image and regional identity. Qaser El Bawiti, the oldest eco-lodge in the region with therapeutic practices needs an architectural development plan to brand its wellness image. So Egyptian eco-lodges could be recognized locally and globally, and enhance Egypt's position in the international wellness market.

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1.1 Research Aims

- Identifying the architectural elements that define the identity of Baharya Oasis to develop a brand strategy that promotes the region's eco-lodges as a wellness destination Image.
- Investigating the impact of eco-lodge architectural components on brand positioning strategy by analyzing branding success stories such as Banasura Hills lodge in India.

1.2 Research Hypothesis

- H1:** Eco lodges' location and accessibility can affect destination brand image, which brand-position the eco-lodge.
- H2:** Eco lodges with wellness potential can improve their attractiveness and competitiveness, and affect eco-lodge brand-positioning.
- H3:** The distinctive architectural form of eco-lodges could reflect the regional identity and affect visitors' perceptions and brand positioning.
- H4:** Service quality such as; amenities, easy internal accessibility, and accommodation comfort affect visitors' satisfaction and brand positioning process.
- H5:** Eco lodge sustainability and energy solutions affect eco-lodge rank and brand positioning process.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Eco-lodges in Wellness Destinations

Wellness tourism is a holistic approach including two primary concepts: conserving the wellness environment and providing a healing atmosphere for visitors. It is "the travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing well-being through integration with nature, local methods of therapy, or wellness experiences that are not available at home." (Global Wellness Institute, 2021) Accordingly, eco-lodges in wellness destinations are the architectural context that motivates the travel decisions of tourists. They are "the facilities that merge with its settings, offering guests an environmental understanding of the natural and cultural context around them." (Gawad, 2020) As such, eco-lodges must contain the main architectural aspects of any competitive and attractive destination, such as tourist attractions, accessibility, accommodation, and amenities. (Wang & Lin, 2021)

2.2 Brand Positioning Eco lodges Architecture as a Wellness Image

Branding has become the most suitable development strategy for many destinations. (Mashhour, 2017) (Hammouda, 2019) It could present a destination's distinctive identity in a competitive manner in the international tourism market. It also allows visitors to communicate physically and emotionally with the place, influencing their decisions to return and recommend. The architecture of eco-lodges is the marketing medium that can reflect a place's and people's personalities. They could reflect its visual image and a physical asset. Therefore, eco-lodge architecture is a product resulting from marketing techniques and branding strategies. (Nagy, 2022) Many academic studies (Pike & Mason, 2010) (Anttiroiko, 2018) (Grénman, Hakala, & Mueller, 2019) (Wang & Lin, 2021), have highlighted the importance of brand positioning as a development concept for wellness destination. It is the strategy to reflect a specific vision, wellness attributes, identity, and image, it is the promise that stakeholders want to root in visitors' perceptions. Consequently, brand positioning eco-lodges as a wellness image is the process of promoting a wellness destination using the architectural elements of a nature-based facility to act as its brand image and reflect its local culture. Eco lodges' architectural elements can brand position wellness destinations to increase their touristic competitive advantage, as illustrated in figure (1).

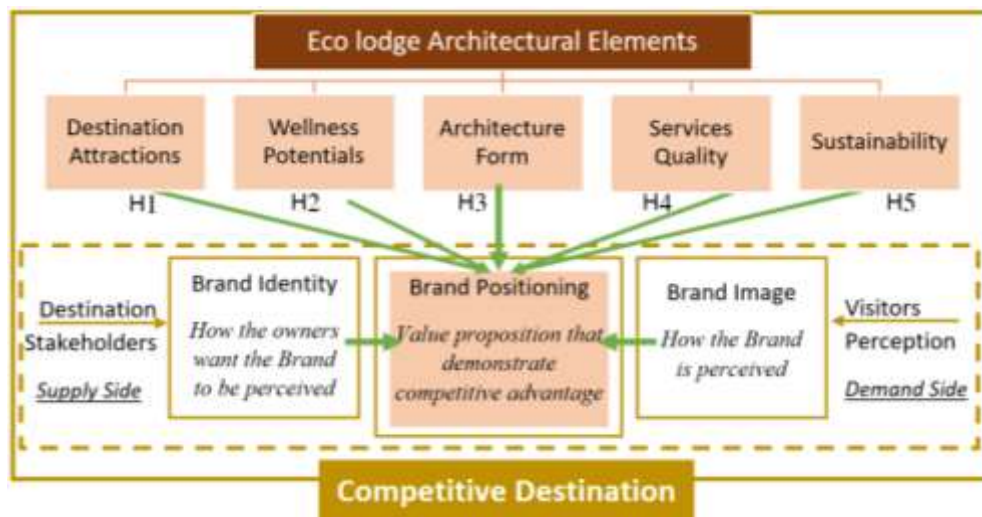


Fig. 1: Destination Brand Positioning Process
(Source: By the Researcher)



3.0 Methodology

The research follows a comparative method to analyze Banasura Hills in India, which is regarded as a successful case in utilizing architectural characteristics to brand-position its wellness attractions and Qaser El Bawiti in Bahariya Oasis in Egypt. This method identifies and criticizes the architectural, cultural, and wellness features of eco-lodges to determine the strategies India used to become one of the top nations in the wellness field despite being a developing country with limited resources. The research adopts qualitative methods to measure the competitive and sustainable eco-lodge architectural elements, in addition to quantitative methods through measuring visitors' satisfaction in Banasura Hills using governmental tourism rankings and recognized websites that determine visitor reviews, besides using the field study method in Qaser El Bawiti through site surveys, interviews, and observation to collect information from primary resources. Accordingly, the research identifies the architectural strengths and weaknesses to formulate a brand-positioning strategy for Qaser El Bawiti to develop its architectural elements and reflect a destination wellness image.

3.1 Case Study Selection Criteria

The case studies were chosen according to the following points:

Table 1. Selection Criteria for Case Studies

Selection Criteria		Banasura Hills, Kerala, India	Qaser El Bawiti, Bahariya Oasis, Egypt	
Country International Recognition	Wellness Rank	12 th place in 2019 (Global Wellness Institute, 2021)	43 rd place in 2019 (Global Wellness Institute, 2021)	
	Branding Rank	22 nd place in 2021 (Bloom Consulting, 2022)	25 th place in 2021 (Bloom Consulting, 2022)	
	Sustainability Rank	98 th place in 2021 (Euromonitor International, 2021)	91 st place in 2021 (Euromonitor International, 2021)	
Location				
General Background	<p>Fig (2) Banasura Hills (Source: (Banasura Hills Lodge, 2022)</p> <p>The lodge is located in Wayanad at an altitude of 980 m. the site is preserved by UNESCO. It lies 18 Km from Banasura Sagar Dam and shares its architectural features. (Re-thinking the Future, 2017)</p>		<p>Fig (3) Qaser El Bawiti (Source: By the Researcher)</p> <p>The lodge is located in Bawiti village in Bahariya Oasis the most accessible oasis in the western desert. The lodge is built in the traditional style of the region.</p>	
Destination Brief	<p>Kerala the "Land of Ayurveda", is considered the best wellness destination that has a rich heritage and distinctive natural environment.</p>		<p>Bahariya Oasis is the closest destination to Cairo that provide desert exploration, wellness, and historical tourist vacation, with an exceptional landscape.</p>	
Wellness Attractions	<p>Kerala is India's best and most preferred wellness destination because of its Ayurveda and traditional holistic healing processes. (Telej & Gamble, 2019)</p>		<p>It has many healing springs, therapeutic weather, and rare healing plants. (ElShiaty, 2016)</p>	
Case Rational	<p>Banasura Hills is an example of India's initiatives to sustain its wellness tourism using eco-lodge architecture and enhancing sustainable travel rank.</p>		<p>In addition to Bahariya's wellness potential, it has archeological importance and local culture. Qaser El Bawiti is the oldest eco-lodge in the region however, it is not known for its unique experience.</p>	

(Source: By the Researcher)

4.0 Results of Analysis

4.1 Case Study (1): Banasura Hills, Kerala in India

Kerala was named the most popular tourist destination among foreign visitors in 2019. (Telej & Gamble, 2019) (Research and Statistics Division, 2019) Because it promotes itself as a sustainable wellness destination by combining the eco-lodge sector with wellness techniques. Its branding goal was to present Kerala as a symbol of sustainable well-being by combining the eco-lodge industry with Ayurveda therapies. (Romão, Seal, Hansen, Joseph, & Piramanayagam, 2021)



Fig. (4) Banasura Hills Reception
Source: (Banasura Hills Lodge, 2022)

The lodge was built on 35 acres in 2008 by Eugene Pandala, an Indian architect who got inspired by Hassan Fathy's work. He is interested in preserving cultural history, using natural materials, and biodiversity conservation. (Banasura Hills Lodge, 2022)

- Urban Analysis and Destination Attractions

The lodge is situated in the heart of Wayanad, Kerala, and provides direct physical and visual access to its surroundings. The lodge offers entertainment packages to the famous natural reservation and cultural sites to learn about the place's tribal folk history. (IAS, 2022) Yet, the lodge was rated as a remote place with limited transportation options, which affects the tourist experience and brand equity. (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019) (Research and Statistics Division, 2019)



Fig. (5) Banasura Hills Urban Analysis
(Source: Adapted from Google Earth)

- Wellness Potentials

The lodge provides Ayurveda wellness programs that help with detoxification, stress relief, anti-aging, and other lifestyle-related diseases. They offer different practices such as massages, yoga, and treating body ailments using locally made oil and herbs. The wellness zone is distinguished by its complete privacy and direct access to nature, with a design that reflects its local identity and integration with the eco lodge's international standards through the provision of a waterfall pool and green tea gardens (fig.6). (Banasura Hills Lodge, 2022) According to travelers' ranks and recognized tourism reviews, which range between 350-400 reviews from 2016 to 2023, visitors described their wellness experience as an entire treatment process in collaboration with nature but with no medical reference. (Romão, Seal, Hansen, Joseph, & Piramanayagam, 2021) (Jawahar & M.K., 2022) (Travel Weekly, 2022)

- Architecture Form



a. Ayurveda Massage Room



b. The lodge Architecture form

Figure (6) Banasura Hills Attractions
Source: (Banasura Hills Lodge, 2022)

- Service Quality

According to recognized tourism reviews, which range between 350-400 reviews from 2016 to 2023, the lodge has satisfying hospitality services with ranks averaging from 4.1 to 4.6. (Wayanad, 2022) (Travel Weekly, 2022) (Jawahar & M.K., 2022) They stated that the accommodations areas offer comfortable international facilities that meet all demands. In addition, the lodge has accessible amenities, such as nutrition programs that include locally grown spices and herbs, a playground for children, and family bonding programs. Furthermore, wellness services affect hospitality satisfaction since they give travelers a unique experience, which affects Kerala's brand image as a wellness destination. (Telej & Gamble, 2019)

- Sustainability

The lodge uses many energy consumption solutions, such as mud, which helps in reducing the carbon footprint of the building to increase its durability and provide a comfortable internal environment. However, the lodge follows constant maintenance procedures due to the mud's low moisture resistance. In addition, they use recycled wood for manufacturing the furniture with periodic anti-termite treatment using cashew shell oil rather than chemical agents. The lodge provides the maximum natural light using CFL bulbs that minimize energy consumption. (Scale Designs, 2019)

3.3 Case Study (2): Qaser El Bawiti, Baharyia Oasis in Egypt

Egypt is now working on its branding strategy especially branding wellness destination. Baharyia Oasis is a significant wellness destination with more than 250 springs. (ElShiaty, 2016) They have different properties between warm and cold mineral and sulfur springs, with a temperature range between 20° to 60°. The most famous springs in the oasis are; Ain Bishmu, Ain Muftilla, Bir Mattar, and Bir Sigam. In addition, their local people are experts in implanting rare plants and use them in their unique healing practices. As such, it heals rheumatism, rheumatoid, skin diseases, and joint pain.



Fig. (7) Qaser El Bawiti Entrance, Baharyia Oasis
(Source: By the Researcher)

The lodge was built on 11500 m² in 1998. It is considered the oldest lodge in Bawiti Village. According to the owner interview, who inherited the lodge from his forefathers, the architecture accommodates the social and geographical characteristics of the region using local building techniques.

- Site Observations

Urban Analysis and Destination Attractions: The lodge sits in the middle of Bawiti town, surrounded by palm groves, natural rock formations, and a medicinal hot spring that aids the treatment process. According to the owner, the lodge organizes tourist trips to Baharyia Oasis and Farafra tourism areas to encourage tourist engagement and provide a holistic brand image.



Fig. (8) Qaser El Bawiti Urban Analysis
(Source: Adapted from Google Earth)

Wellness Potentials: The lodge owner made some plumbing changes to allow the medical water to flow in the lodge's shaded pool, built with native rocks. The healing process depends on the spring water and the locally grown medicinal herbs.
Architecture Form: The architecture of the lodge is organic and responds to severe desert conditions. It is built spontaneously from natural stones and palm wood to add authenticity, reflects regional culture, and provide ideal temperatures throughout the year.



a. Wellness Area



b. Architecture Form

Fig. (9) Qaser El Bawiti Attractions
 (Source: By the Researcher)

Service Quality: The lodge has 38 large and comfortable rooms, some of which have a private Jacuzzi. The restaurant serves traditional Egyptian and Bedouin food. There are several sitting places available for leisure and stargazing. The owner decorates the rooms and yard with locally manufactured fabrics and antiques from the region's past and mythologies, but it lacks explanation using a labeling system to brand the place's history and stories.

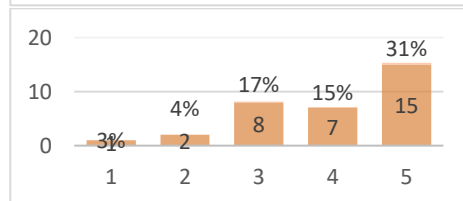
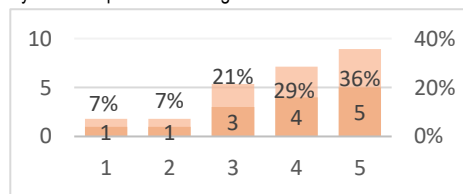
Sustainability: Desert communities are famous for their compatible architecture with the region's weather conditions without harming their pure nature and expressing their social environment. They use architectural and urban solutions that spontaneously achieve all aspects of sustainability. (Bassily & Refaat, 2021) The lodge does not have any renewable energy resources, but they have other solutions as using fans instead of air conditioning, as well as no luxury lighting units, only candles, and gas lamps.

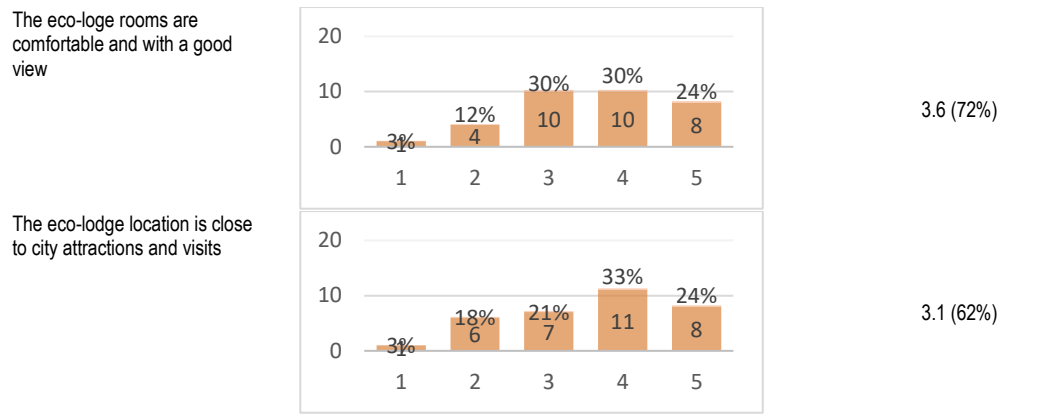
• **Survey Results**

Table (2) shows 33 responses that use the scaling approach to evaluate the architectural and wellness components of the eco-lodge; one represents strongly disagree, while five represent highly approve. Most respondents were female (70%), while males were 30%. The age range varies, but the majority were between the ages of 26 and 35 (39%), followed by 36-45, 46-55, and 15-25 (24%), (18%), and (12%) respectively, and finally 6% over 56. Most respondents were Egyptian (94%), while some were Polish (12%). Their travel motivations were desert exploration (82%), followed by relaxation & meditation (58%) and sightseeing (39%), others were keen on experiencing wellness hot springs (27%), and the least were interested in spending their vacation in traditional accommodation (21%). 94 % of the respondents found the White Desert is the destination brand image, followed by place architecture with 45.5%.

Table 2. Survey Results

Category	Scale	Mean
Wellness Satisfaction	Bahariya Oasis was not widely known for its wellness potential, therefore, most people were not eager to try its hot springs. Only 42% try wellness practices during their visit.	3.7 (76%)
The eco-lodge architecture form reflects the destination environment		4.0 (80%)





(Source: By the Researcher)

5.0 Findings and Discussion

Accordingly, an evaluation criterion is adopted to evaluate the effectiveness of the architectural elements in positioning the region as a wellness destination, shown in table (3). The evaluation criteria adapt the numerical method to identify positive and negative points for each case. Taking into consideration three scenarios for evaluation, as shown in table (3).

Table 3. Evaluating Grades

Evaluation	Grade	Symbol
Achieved	2	●
Semi Achieved	1	◐
No Achieved	0	○

(Source: By the Researcher)

Table 4. Evaluation Results

Evaluation	Point of Evaluation	Case (1)	Case (2)
Touristic Attractions	The destination is well known for the variation of touristic attractions besides wellness as historical and cultural tourism.	◐	●
	The integration between the eco-lodge and the surrounding environment.	◐	●
	The eco-lodge is accessible to the main roads, airports, or any means of transportation.	○	○
	Hosting cultural festivals/ adapting cultural hub.	◐	◐
	The eco-lodge is a part of the government development plans.	◐	○
TOTAL (/10)		4	5
Wellness Practices	In visitors' perception, wellness is the destination's main attribute.	●	○
	Local people are experts in wellness practices.	◐	◐
	Wellness practice is part of inherited culture.	●	●
	Integrating wellness resources with advanced medical services in a holistic well-being process by the public sector.	◐	◐
	Wellness services are a combination between identity and international design standards.	●	◐
TOTAL (/10)		8	6
Signature Architecture	The lodge architecture form is recognized internationally and locally.	●	◐
	The architecture form obeys destination functionality and local anesthetic.	●	●
	Taking advantage of the local materials and the surrounding natural resources.	●	●
	The lodge's construction techniques represent its local culture.	◐	●
	The architecture of the lodge reflects a wellness image.	◐	○
TOTAL (/10)		8	7
Service Quality	The lodge has high-quality accommodation facilities that reflect its local style.	◐	◐

	The lodge has an excellent level of hospitality and friendliness.	●	●
	Variety of entertainment and amenities opportunities.	●	◐
	The eco-lodge is secure and safe.	◐	●
	It has average outdoor facilities and a landscape of more than 90%.	●	○
TOTAL (/10)		8	6
Sustainability	Compatible architecture with regional weather conditions.	●	●
	The architecture is not harming or negatively affecting the destination's natural resources.	●	●
	The eco-lodge uses renewable energy resources and energy management systems.	◐	○
	Local people are engaged in the eco-lodge management process.	◐	◐
	The government enhances destination infrastructure and its sustainability in its developing plan.	◐	○
TOTAL (/10)		7	5
TOTAL EVALUATION SCORE (/50) (100%)		35 (70%)	29 (58%)

(Source: By the Researcher)

As a result, with 72%, Banasura Lodge was a successful example of a wellness destination brand and sustainable travel. The lodge used its architectural form to reflect the destination's identity and aesthetic without affecting its functionality, which helps recognize the lodge locally and internationally. Also, the high quality of the hospitality services has impacted the increase in tourist satisfaction, which has raised word of mouth and intention to suggest or revisit the lodge. (Telej & Gamble, 2019) Its satisfied wellness facilities have given the eco-lodge a competitive advantage compared to other eco-lodges in the region. However, the lodge isolation has affected the number of tourist arrivals. Furthermore, through its sustainability solutions, the lodge was partially successful in raising awareness about preserving natural resources. (Romão, Seal, Hansen, Joseph, & Piramanayagam, 2021) As a result, H2, H3, and H4 effectively verified, supporting the eco-lodge in establishing itself as a wellness tourism destination.

The architectural elements of Qaser el Bawiti have received 58% because the lodge lacks sufficient amenities that could improve tourist satisfaction and their intent to visit. Although, the eco-lodge lacks connectivity with its surroundings due to its isolation and limited transportation options, despite its distinct and identifiable architectural form, the lodge is not well known and does not serve as a destination image, in addition to the need to improve and enhance its wellness practices to gain a competitive advantage and increase visitor satisfaction. Moreover, energy solutions would help raise tourists' awareness of natural resources and improve the destination's brand image as a sustainable wellness destination.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The study examined the impact of eco-lodge architectural elements on a brand positioning strategy. According to the assessment of the Banasura Hills in India and Qaser El Bawiti in Egypt, wellness services, hospitality quality, and architectural image, all have a direct impact on lodge attractiveness and visitor satisfaction, which can promote brand image and position eco-lodges as wellness destinations. As a result, the research revealed that wellness practices, high-quality hospitality services, and memorable architecture are the main criteria that might brand position eco-lodges as wellness images, while destination tourism attractions and eco-lodge sustainability are secondary aspects. Both aspects can contribute to a unique travel experience, which is directly affecting tourists' impressions and brand positioning of the region as a wellness destination.

Therefore, decision-makers in Egyptian need to study Baharyia Oasis to develop a successful brand-positioning strategy that enhances wellness destinations using the architecture of eco-lodges as a competitive image. First, encouraging a collaboration plan between the government, NGOs, and private sector comes to determine the place's vision and values. Secondly, formulating the brand identity, that reflects the destination personality and achieves destination competitiveness. Third, identifying the communication strategy that could deliver stakeholders' vision through the place architecture. As a result, providing locals with suitable wellness training plans is a must, to enhance the place professionally. Enhancing brand experience through integrating traditions and customs in the eco-lodge design features. Providing tourism packages for exploring the region and entertainment activities could raise visitors' satisfaction and intention to revisit. Furthermore, continual brand evaluation is necessary for destination enhancement and development.

The results of this study could serve as a starting point to enhance branding strategies in the hospitality field especially eco-lodge design. Therefore, this paper recommends interdisciplinary studies to enhance the relationship between branding strategies and hospitality architectural elements.

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