

BOOK REVIEWS

CITY SPACES – TOURIST PLACES: URBAN TOURISM PRECINCTS

BRUCE HAYLLAR, TONY GRIFFIN, DEBORAH EDWARDS, Routledge, London, 2016, 381 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-17732-1

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A short walk on the streets of the central ring of Bucharest provides the visitor with different and contrasting views. There is the old commercial city, located between Unirii and University Squares, crowded with pubs, restaurants, night clubs, souvenir shops, and tourist groups following a hurried guide and taking photos of the monuments. Then, across Magheru Blv., in the Armenian neighbourhood, a specific architecture and urban planning style are maintained, with characteristics like small streets, old buildings and a strong historical heritage, but the number of tourists and enterprises is significantly lower. As the visitor goes north, towards the Roman and Victory Squares, the streets become larger and more and more crowded. However, the number of tourists is still low, with the main activities belonging to the business sector. From here, we can deduce that only a small part of the city is actually experienced by tourists and there is a clear differentiation between the space used by them and the rest of the city. This is what Bruce Hayllar, Tony Griffin and Deborah Edwards call a “tourism precinct”, a distinctive geographic area, clearly separated from the rest of the urban space, presenting a strong concentration of activities specific to the tourism sector.

The problem that the authors of the book “City Spaces – Tourist Places: Urban Tourism Precincts” identified is that tourism precincts were never analysed in depth with regard to what they are, and why, where, and how they appear. Locals use these spaces for economic

purposes, while tourists want to experience the culture and authenticity of places, leading to land use conflicts and a need for cooperation for satisfying all needs and creating a unique identity: “the emergence of [...] precincts reflects how the culture of everyday life is not simply a demand created by capital, nor even consumer preference, but also entails active cultural practices behind the creation of people’s identities and identifications” (Su et al. 2018: 37).

This need of co-existence between tourists, locals and business enterprises has been achieved through both the capitalization of historic and cultural heritage (Su et al. 2018) and the rejuvenation of old industrial sites through strategies which improve the urban image and identity (Spirou 2018). The book “City Spaces – Tourist Places” proposes a shift of perspective from analysing why tourists visit places and what precincts look like, to investigating what visitors actually do and experience at the destination and why precincts appear. Thus, the authors share the view of Gehl (2002: 9): “a good city can be compared to a good party – people stay for much longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves”, and they try to explain the mechanisms that make an urban space a qualitative and vibrant place.

The book is structured in four sections, which allow for a gradual and comprehensive understanding of the tourism precincts. Section I sets the foundations of both the book

and the concept, section II offers detailed theoretical explanations for the key characteristics of precincts, section III reviews the precincts in practice, while section IV provides the conclusions and the lessons deduced from the previous analyses.

Section I, "Foundations", comprises four chapters that provide the reader with a descriptive, analytical and theoretical framework for an initial consideration of the urban tourism precinct. The first chapter, "Urban Tourism Precincts: Engaging with the Field", plays the role of an introduction, setting out the context in which the book appeared together with its objectives and structure. Chapter 2, "The Evolution of the Tourism Precinct", focuses on three key ideas: the economic context of precinct creation, the role and function of tourism precincts within the urban environment, as well as the context of precincts development (including issues like authenticity and sustainability). Chapter 3, "Places and People: A Precinct Typology", offers a change of perspective from the classical descriptive typology of tourist spaces, to a functional one, which can provide us with an understanding of what precincts do for visitors. Chapter 4, "Theorizing Precincts: Disciplinary Perspectives", presents a range of disciplinary approaches (geographic, urban political economy, sociocultural, behavioural), which have been largely functional in their nature. The author finds those approaches limited in the examination of tourist experiences, so that he proposes a new approach in the end: the poststructuralist one. Section II, "Key Themes and Issues", is structured in seven chapters that analyse in detail some essential characteristics for a comprehensive understanding of the urban tourism precinct concept. Chapter 5, "Urban Tourism Precincts: An Overview of Key Themes and Issues", sets the conceptual framework of the urban precinct, by providing details related to the following elements and the relationship between them: urban destination context, structure and form of precinct, impacts of tourist spaces, urban precinct experience, and governance policy. Chapter 6, "Precincts Within the Urban Form: Relationships with the City", contributes to the understanding of tourism central districts by

examining the spatial elements pertaining to tourism precincts, as well as their evolutionary process, the flows and interactions that they are a part of, their impacts, variations and prospects.

A conceptual foundation for the analysis of tourism precincts, focused on the synergistic relationship between the spatial form of tourism precincts and the performances of tourists, is provided in Chapter 7, "The Structure and Form of Urban Tourism Precincts: Setting the Stage for Tourist Performances", and it is continued, from an economic point of view, in Chapter 8, "Contribution of Urban Precincts to the Urban Economy". In this chapter, the interrelationship between precinct development and its impacts on the local economy, as well as the potential costs and benefits, are highlighted using a three periods framework (before construction, short-term and long-term economic cycles). Chapter 9, "The Tourist Experience of Precincts", concluded (by focusing on the existential dialectic as well as the cultural and phenomenological studies) that experiencing the tourism precincts is a social experience rather than a solitary one. From the examination of experiences, Chapter 10, "Conflicts and Politics in Precinct Development", maintains the sociological and existential perspective and it provides details and examples on how urban tourism precincts develop in the context of conflicts associated with managing the competing interests of various stakeholders (investors, business environment, community opinion, inter-governmental agencies and so on). The last chapter of this section, "Visitor-Host Relationships: Conviviality between Visitors and Host Communities", explores how the strong links and overlaps between the host and the tourist experiences of place can lead to relations of conviviality rather than conflict, especially in the newly gentrified areas.

Section III, "Precincts in Practice", is composed of six chapters and it focuses specifically on the practice of governance by presenting a range of international case studies, which reflect either exemplary practices, or other situations from which important lessons can be drawn. Chapter 12,

“Precinct Planning and Design, Management and Marketing: An Overview”, sets the foundation for the case studies by defining the range of precinct governance activities and by discussing some of the key associated challenges (understanding the wider contexts, the importance of locals and tourists, the benefits of diversity, the necessity for a long-term perspective). The next chapters present five case studies of tourism precinct governance and they reflect a complex range of contrasting contextual circumstances, with each one focusing on one type of governance activity of the three main broad categories previously identified by the authors: planning and design (Chapter 13 on Grote Markt, Groningen – with a focus on precinct planning, Chapter 14 on Darling Harbor, Sydney – with a focus on precinct development), management (Chapter 15 on London’s “South Bank” – concerned with precinct management structures, Chapter 16 on Sheffield City Center – dealing with more day-to-day management issues), and marketing (Chapter 17 about Evora, Portugal and Hoi An, Vietnam – two case studies linked by the World Heritage listing).

Last but not least, Section IV, “Lessons from Theory and Practice”, through its only chapter, “City Spaces – Tourist Spaces: A reprise”, concludes the book by reflecting on the four central themes around which the book revolves: the tourists – locals relation, the experience of tourists, the complexities of governance activities related to precincts and the cost-benefit analysis of precinct development to different stakeholders. Also, it includes some specific research questions that emerge from the book, which can represent the starting points for future researchers: “What are the success factors for sustainable precinct enterprises?”; “How do we ensure that precincts provide opportunities for experiences that match the needs of tourists and locals?”.

Overall, the book is well written and organized in an attractive style, such that it can be easily read, even as a novel. Also, each chapter has a suggestive title and it can be read as a separate research article, without affecting its overall understanding. Also, the box of questions that follows each study makes the book useful for didactic purposes, as they provide a test for the general understanding of the concept and they provoke the reader to think outside the box and to find innovative ideas and research subjects. The photographs are complementing the text in an effective manner, by depicting both people and places, but at some point the reader may feel the need for more visual information, especially in the case study chapters.

The study of urban tourism precincts in the framework proposed by Bruce Hayllar, Tony Griffin and Deborah Edwards represents an insightful investigation into the urban tourism precincts, approaching issues related to the need to be recognized, addressed and appropriately dealt with if a precinct is to form a truly sustainable part of a city’s tourist base. This way, the book raises some concerns related to city governance and it represents a valuable scientific contribution and a useful tool for policymakers involved in the integrated analysis of urban spaces and tourist places.

References

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