Heritage Tourism in Urban Areas – Contemporary Complexities and Challenges

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Abstract

Urban areas have long been regarded as an integral part of contemporary tourism activities. From large metropolitan areas to small historic cities, urban environments now represent an important aspect for business and trade, but also for tourism and leisure. Although the significance of urban areas in tourism is well documented, the increased number of visitors has dramatically changed the overall landscape of many destinations and has resulted in numerous impacts for both public and private sector. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of some contemporary issues and tensions associated with heritage resources in urban areas. The study reveals the positive and negative consequences of using heritage attributes as a tool for destination development and further addresses some emerging topics such as sustainability, authenticity and interpretation of heritage attributes for tourism purposes.

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Keywords: urban tourism, heritage, cities, authenticity, sustainability

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Introduction

Urban tourism has emerged in academic literature during the last few decades and has gained an interest by various academics, planning and management professionals (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Edward, Griffin & Hayllar, 2008; Law, 2002; Page, 1995). This growing interest can be linked with various industrial, social, and economic aspects of modern societies, such as industrial development and urban revitalization (Jansen-Verbeke & Lievoius, 1999; Spirou, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Globalization and the rapid expansion of tourism as well as the development of transport and communications have turned the focus of many urban governors and local governmental officials to tourism as a vehicle for economic development (Law, 2002; Page, 1995). Increasingly, urban areas have been transformed as "centres of control, interaction, creativity and enjoyment" (Burtenshaw, Bateman & Ashworth, 1991:70) and now feature a variety of attractions available for tourism purposes such as purpose-built theme parks, tourist-historic districts and urban waterfronts (Gospodini, 2001; Howard, 2003). Although some positive economic impacts have been reported, tourism development has led to numerous complexities and issues related to planning, management and sustainability (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Urry and Larsen (2011) points out that globalization has led to homogenization of tourist products and as a result, destinations need to develop products and attractions which emphasize the distinctiveness and authenticity of their local resources. Heritage tourism has often been considered as the perfect match to these criteria and cultural and heritage products have the potential to enhance urban economies, to revive local traditions and cultural life and to revitalize some local craft industries (Timothy, 2011; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). However, as noted by Jansen-Verbeke and Lievois (1999), revitalization of cities is not granted and is inextricably linked to a number of factors including financial capacity of public and private authorities, political and economic influences and quality of tourism products.

This paper addresses previously explained issues by providing a discussion related to a number of contemporary issues within the context of cultural heritage and urban tourism. It starts with a critical review about urban tourism as an area of research and then moves on to the context of heritage and cultural resources within urban settings. The paper briefly analyzes some emerging topics such as conservation and preservation of heritage resources with a particular emphasis on the interpretation and authenticity of heritage resources.

Urban tourism as a field of enquiry

Despite the increased popularity of urban areas, the notion of urban tourism still remains neglected with only few texts entirely focused on this phenomenon (e.g. Ashworth & Page, 2011; Page, 1995; Law, 2002; Selby, 2004; Spirou, 2010). According to Ashworth (2003:143) "those studying tourism neglected cities while those studying cities neglected tourism". Early work on the topic referred in classical texts within various disciplines such as geography, planning and sociology (e.g. Urry, 1990) but the development of the topic as a field of enquiry has also expanded to a wide range of disciplines such as urban planning and design, marketing and service quality (Pearce, 2001; Selby, 2004). However, some theoretical and methodological weakness still remain which reflect the problematic nature of urban tourism (Law, 2002; Spirou, 2010; Page, 1995). Most of previous studies focus on large cities (e.g. Chang, Milne, Fallon & Pohlmann, 1996; Rogerson, 2002; Van den Berg, van der Borg & van der Meer, 1995) while research in small-historic towns is limited (Haley, Snaith & Miller, 2005; Maitland, 2006). Page (1995) notes that urban tourism literature fails to provide a holistic understanding, whereas Selby (2004) argues that urban studies rarely draw upon contexts associated with social sciences. In addition, he points out that majority of

published work overemphasizes quantitative findings, rather than the validity of research. According to Page (1999:163), urban tourism studies are largely descriptive and 'do not contribute to the greater theoretical or methodological understanding of urban tourism.' The conceptual definition of urban tourism also remains unclear. Although it can simply refer to tourism in cities, it is particularly apparent that such definition is not appropriate having already discussed the multiple characteristics of urban areas. Ashworth (1989:50) argues that urban tourism is an "integral, traditional and proper part of urban life", but also reveals about the complexity of defining this phenomenon. According to Pearce (2001) this complexity is interrelated with the specific features of urban settings such as social and cultural heterogeneity, urban functions and local societies and multidimensional economics.

Complexities and challenges

Economic and social changes in cities since 1980s have largely contributed to numerous changes in both developed and emerging economies (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The development of mass tourism and increased popularity of holiday destinations have influenced the development of tourism in urban areas. As a result, cultural and heritage aspects have been used to fortify competitiveness of given cities and to attract more tourists (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000; Timothy, 2011).

Cultural resources are largely seen as powerful tools in social and economic dimensions, a means towards conservation and a positive asset for innovation (Jansen – Verbeke & Lieivois, 1999; Timothy, 2011). Culture and heritage are among the growing segments in tourism industry and their economic, social and environmental importance is well acknowledged (Park, 2014; Richards, 1996; Timothy, 2011). In historic places, in particular, they can stimulate cultural revival, provide new experiences and enrich the tourism products in urban areas (Jansen-Verbeke & Lievois, 1999; Richards, 1996; Van

der Borg et al., 1996). Many development strategies are entirely based on urban heritage in accordance with specific heritage attributes, cultural events or urban landscape (Chang et al., 1996). However, the growing importance of urban destinations has inevitably led to questions regarding representation of tourist-historic cities and their specific attributes (Graham, 2002; Middleton, 2007).

The convergence of urban heritage and tourism often causes problems of contradictive interests between conservationists and tourism developers (Orbasli, 2000; Shackley, 1995; Wahab, 1997). Many of these arguments have led to debates regarding sustainability of heritage sites. The concept of sustainable development is largely relevant in the sector of cultural heritage tourism as conservation and preservation of heritage sites and environment are in accordance with the principles of sustainable development (Fusco Girard & Nijkamp, 2009; Garrod & Fyall, 2000). However, despite contextual and theoretical common themes, the integration of these principles and practices comprises a contested dilemma in terms of commercialization, authenticity and accessibility (Darlow, Essex & Brayshay, 2012; Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Generally, the challenges linked to the fragility and irreplaceability of nature. Achieving sustainability of heritage requires the fulfilment of various needs and a balance between economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects (Wall, 2009).

In broader terms, sustainable development requires an implementation of a specific planning process, which integrates three core approaches: preservation, conservation and heritage planning (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Theoretically, these terms might be interchangeable, but in reality they represent different values and objectives. Preservation focuses on sustaining the building or site resources and thus keep their authenticity and uniqueness. Similarly, conservation aims to save the value of heritage resources, but focuses on various techniques and certain limitations related to heritage

management and development (Orbasli & Woodward, 2009). Heritage planning is a result of the increased demand for heritage products and their consumption and the development of the process is essentially meant to facilitate the management of heritage sites and attractions. Moreover, heritage planning is centered upon the different approaches and levels of consumption and interpretation of heritage, which appears to be a problematic issue (see Rakic & Chambers, 2012; Urry, 2003; 2005).

The interpretation of heritage also relates to the role of heritage resources within large and metropolitan cities (Selby, 2004). According to Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) and Page (1995), large cities are comprised of different multifunctional areas including historic, cultural, shopping and tourist areas. Newman and Maitland (2009) provide the concept of "world tourism cities" – ones with substantial historical assets which are cultural and spiritual centers, but at the same time attract business and leisure visitors. Within this dimension, however, historic cities tend to be differentiated from the other areas as they are arguably a distinctive array of spatial attributes rather than single tourism products (Graham, et al., 2000). Orbasli (2000) denotes that heritage contributes 'into the life of a previous or foreign era and more often a sense of identity and of belonging within physical surrounding responding to the human scale' (Orbasli, 2000, p. 29). According to Middleton (2007) less attention has been paid in regard to historical landscapes despite the 'heritagisation' of cities. He argues that the role of heritage in large metropolitan areas is largely contested and heritage is not marketed as a distinctive personal experience. Graham (2002) explains this with the interpretation of heritage in urban areas and notes that heritage should be perceived as selective attributes of the past rather than just what is inherited from the past. Indeed, she highlights that heritage is a subject of personal interpretation of a particular culture, but also can be an appreciation of intercultural aspects. Or-

basli (2000) indicates that heritage is not just an interpretation of historical and cultural attributes, but also represents cultural lifestyles of cultural authenticity.

The notion of authenticity within urban heritage is also a contested dilemma. Authenticity in tourism has been studied and discussed from a variety of different angles by a great number of researchers from different backgrounds (Olsen, 2002; Pendlebury, Short & While, 2009). Authenticity is inextricably linked with heritage products and continues to be a distinctive element of development and promotion of heritage tourism (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Ramkisson & Uysal, 2010)

The conflict over the notion of authenticity is still present in academic literature and the debate is still largely contested (Olsen, 2007). Various researchers have tried to theoretically define the scope and significance of authenticity. In the view of Sharpley (1994), authenticity is associated with culture and traditions with a particular reference to unique, true and genuine experiences. According to Steiner & Reisinger (2006:299), authenticity can be defined in two different dimensions - as a characteristic which refers to the uniqueness of artefacts and experiences and as an attribute that underpins the distinctiveness of an individual.

Wang (1999) defines three theoretical approaches of authenticity: objectivism, constructivism and postmodernism. The objective authenticity supports real and genuine sites, artefacts and experiences which are entirely regarded as pure and unadulterated (Chhabra, 2012; Wang, 1999). The objectivist approach refers to the extent to the level of realness and uniqueness of sites and events and actually represents what MacCannell (1973) introduced and believed to be the 'quest for authenticity'. Following the characteristics of heritage sites, objective authenticity seems as an appropriate requirement for heritage sites and attractions.

Authenticity has long been considered as a problematic issue and to a large extent this is largely due to the applicability of this term in different context (Chhabra, 2005). In broader terms, authenticity can be underpinned by a variety of ideologies and dimensions, which advocate the wide range of definitions of this phenomenon. However, as emerged from the literature, two fundamental conflicts may be identified. Firstly, the conceptual definition of authenticity remains unclear, which is a result of the different contexts in which it is applied (Cohen, 2007; Olsen, 2007). Secondly, the criterion for authentic experiences is not defined as what is authentic for one might not be authentic to another (Cohen, 2007; Heitmann, 2011). In relation to urban heritage and authenticity of heritage-based urban sites and attractions, authenticity may be studies from two different angles. Firstly, we can refer to the objective authenticity and argue that urban heritage should represent the authentical and genuine cultural and historical attributes of a given area. However, heritage sites represent not only a physical and aesthetic values, but also contribute for emotional and spiritual experiences (Timothy, 2011). Heritage sites are visited by different people with a spectrum of social and intelectual backgrounds and consequently heritage can be regarded as a socially and contextually constructed phenomenon (Cohen, 1988). The construction is determined by tourists' preferences, staged images and beliefs (Wang, 1999). Therefore, we can also refer to the constructivist approach of authenticity (Wang, 1999) in order to asses the value of authenticity in heritage attractions.

The consumption of heritage is largely influenced by the interpretation of historical and cultural aspects, but it is also a subject of global and local forces (Chang et al., 1996). According to Law (1993), the global factors which have an impact on urban heritage are a result of the recent growth of tourism and its ability to catalyze the local economy, while local forces represent local involvement and stakeholders attitudes. However, both local and national forces contribute to the exploitation of historic towns (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Jansen-Verbeke & Lieivois (1999) argue that heritage is increasingly used for economic regeneration because it has no extra costs and use already available resources. However, as Hewison (1987) notes, heritage-related products are characterized with a high level of fragility and are not replaceable. In addition, Hewison (1987) asserts that heritage industry consumes a large number of urban resources which lead to an imbalance between heritage and other industries. Positive economic effects are also not overlooked and are largely dependent on such factors as quality of transportation, information resources and infrastructural development (Law, 1993).

Conclusion

The growth of urban areas during the last few decades has been a widely discussed and researched topic. Urban settings have demonstrated a spectacular growth, but yet need to address some critical concerns such as protection and preservation of the environment, conservation of urban heritage sites and conservation of cultural fabric. Further research is needed to explore how these contemporary issues have been addressed in both developing and developed countries and how local societies take part in heritage planning and management.

The relationship between urban heritage and tourism also need to be further researched. Although tourism is easily accommodated within urban settings, it requires specific management and planning strategies. These strategies further reflect tourism in broader economic, political, cultural and environmental dimensions. Therefore, tourism products need to be tailored to a level, which facilitates this relationship and offer genuine and attractive products. However, what is genuine and attractive still remains controversial largely because it involves a number of cultural and political influences. More research is needed to explore how these influences

have contributed to the level of authenticity of heritage attractions. Moreover, it remains unclear whether authenticity reflects the history, heritage and cultural identities of local societies or it only concerns certain attributes of the past which are promoted and interpreted for tourism purposes.

By another perspective, the notion of cultural heritage is a particularly important part in numerous management, development and marketing strategies. Despite the notable potential economic benefits of heritage tourism, urban governors need to respond to the negative consequences of tourism and to preserve the value of cultural heritage in order to sustain destination attractiveness and competitiveness. What remains marginalized, however, are the meanings and values which different individuals tend to attach to monuments, heritage sites or cultural landscapes. As Anderson (2010:5) argues, places are an 'ongoing composition of traces' and are largely constructed of meanings and values. Hence, an analysis of heritage requires a thorough investigation of various theoretical underpinnings and contextualisation of differing meanings, interpretations of heritage attributes and cultural ideologies.

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