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Perception and Experience of Urban Areas for Cultural Tourism. A Social Constructivist Approach in Covent Garden

Introduction

Perceptions and experiences of cultural tourism in urban precincts are complex areas of study as there are many elements -intrinsic and extrinsic- that influence and interact with the tourist underpinning the nature of these. There has been a strong focus on recent studies in urban cultural tourism on the creative class and the emergence of new areas and novel developments that appeal to a city's visitors (Maitland, 2007; Maitland, 2010; Richards, 2011). Similarly, the topics of urban regeneration and cultural quarters have also proved to be focal in contemporary research related to urban cultural consumption in a tourism context (McManus and Carruthers, 2014; Smith, 2012). However, the need to research and understand tourist activity in the well-established cultural precinct is also strong given their historical success in attracting visitors due to the concentration of different attractions and experiential opportunities. This research focuses on a popular area in London that has developed naturally and over an extended period of time and in this way, makes a contribution to knowledge regarding the enduring and longstanding cultural precinct.

Covent Garden has been firmly established in London's urban landscape for centuries, attracting a wide ranging set of tourists with different motivations to visit that prompts them to use the area in different ways. It was originally developed as London's first

planned square and evolved organically over time leading to its current status as a centrally located area in the city offering a variety of attractions related to culture, commerce, leisure, entertainment and relaxation. Its distinctive sense of place is rooted in a built environment that speaks of rich heritage, with mostly pedestrianised streets that accommodate limited vehicular traffic and where there is a strong residing population that cohabit the area along with tourist activities of different nature. Adding to the complexity of this case study, the UK's leading Opera House sits at its core raising questions about the influence that the Royal Opera House as a cultural flagship can have upon the area's place making system. This research aims to understand the tourist's perception and experience of a well-established urban precinct by focusing on their visit to Covent Garden and the role that the Royal Opera House has on these processes. The inclusion of the Opera House in this research framework stems from the significance of the relationship between this flagship building and the area as their historical attachment is evident in the fact the theatre is often referred to simply as 'Covent Garden'.

Literature review

Recent studies in urban tourism seem to lean towards contemporary developments (Smith and von Krogh, 2011; Plaza and Silke, 2009) along with the impact of novel urban regeneration schemes on tourist activity (Gonzalez, 2011; Gregory, 2015). It is because of this trend that research on well-established urban precincts is needed by focusing on

longstanding areas that present to the visitor an eclectic mix of urban heritage, strong visual landscape and experiential opportunities based on commerce and leisure. The conceptual framework developed for this work focuses on different approaches to cultural consumption in a tourism context. It also positions the case study within a range of perspectives on urban areas that cluster cultural experiences, flagship developments and the provision of different types of entertainment. Given that this study focuses on an area that is widely popular both with domestic and international visitors, the role that cultural distance plays in their perception and experience of place has also been included in this literature review as it aims to understand the factors that influence these processes.

Experiencing urban cultural precincts

Smith (2007) identifies two types of cultural tourism. The first category deemed as the traditional perspective is based on existing monocultures providing passive experiences to users, is of an educational nature, is location based and makes use of tangible resources. But the author also proposes that novel forms of cultural tourism focus on creativity and provide active experience to its users, it is based in more than one location, focuses on multicultural elements, makes use of intangible resources and is of both an educational and entertaining nature (also supported by Hertzman et al, 2008). These notions are applicable to the case of Covent Garden as the area attracts a contrasting and varied set of tourists from different parts of the world (multicultural elements) and the intangible

resources noted by the author can be related to the cosmopolitan and diverse sense of place that these tourists grant the area with. This diversity suggests that they interpret and experience it in different ways and that heterogeneity exerts an influence in these processes.

Graefke and Vaske (1987) contribute to this understanding by asserting that a tourist experience can be influenced by 'individual, environmental, situational and personality related factors as well as the degree of communication with other people' (as stated in Ryan, 2002:119). This proposition is also useful for this research as it indicates that the host of factors that can affect a tourist's experience and perception of place relate and are influenced by the physical environment. But playing equally important roles are the social interactions that are common in popular areas for tourism and culture (Harvey and Lorenzen, 2006; Lopez-Bonilla and Lopez-Bonilla, 2007) and to the individual's personality and subjective processes of assimilating and interpreting objects and places (Dawson and Jensen, 2011; Falk, 2011).

The cultural distance proposition

Regarding the tourist's origin and how it may exercise an influence in their perception and experience of place, McKercher (2002) develops the notion of cultural distance. This is contextualised by McIntosh and Goeldner (1990) who indicate that 'visitors from more

culturally distant regions tend to seek deeper experiences, whereas those cultural tourists from culturally proximate regions seek a more entertainment orientated experience' (as cited in McKercher, 2002:36). Therefore, this approach suggests that domestic tourists may focus their experience of place on entertainment and relaxation because they are already familiar with the urban settings they visit and that international tourists are more inclined to engage with educational experiences to learn from a culture they are unfamiliar with. Conversely, Jackson (2000) asserts that 'truly culturally distant destinations are too strange and too threatening, with the prospect of visiting too intimidating to be enjoyable, unless a sufficiently large environmental bubble can be created to shield the visitor from that strangeness' (as cited in McKercher and Cho So-Ming 2001:25). In this sense, 'strangeness' may attract or deter tourists from visiting a site or a precinct and influence the way in which they experience it. In relation to this, Larsen (2007) states that although central to tourism studies, the nature and essence of the tourist's experience is a field that remains under researched. The quest for a clear approach to this topic points towards McCannell's (1999) views, which evaluate the tourist's level of understanding of what is perceived and the impact of this understanding on the nature of the experience. The author (p.68) affirms that 'the tourist's inability to understand what he sees is the product of the structural arrangement that sets him into a touristic relationship with a social object'.

The contrast between approaches in understanding the role of cultural proximity indicates the need to conduct research in this field and also suggests that a tourist bubble (Judd and Fainsten, 1999) might help lever any degree of intimidation that unfamiliar settings might cause the tourist. Goeldner and Ritchie (2003) approach the degree in which cultural distance may influence the tourist's perception and experience of place indicating that this notion can be in itself interpreted in different ways. From both perspectives, however, depth of experience is central but a clear assertion of what constitutes a deep or shallow experience of place is difficult to define. McKercher and Chow So-Ming (2001) address this subject from the learning perspective indicating that a deep experience of place encompasses developing an understanding of the local culture and heritage whereas shallow experiences are characterised by merely sightseeing without a learning process. The authors use this framework to propose a categorisation of cultural tourists depending on their level of cultural motivation to visit a site and their experience of place. If this experience is shallow they might be incidental, casual or sightseeing tourists as their level of cultural motivation rises. On the contrary, they could also be serendipitous or purposeful cultural tourists if they have deep experiences with varying levels of cultural motivation.

McKercher and Chow So-Ming (2001) also use a series of indicators based on tourist activity to measure their depth of experience of place. These are: to mostly sightsee and/or

photography or seeing interesting and unusual sites, to learn a little about the local culture and heritage, to learn a lot about the local culture and heritage, or to develop a deep understanding of the local culture and heritage. These parameters directly relate a tourist's depth of experience with the choice of activities undertaken during a visit and to a learning process that comes as a result. However, the first indicator assumes that the individual seeks to experience a foreign culture in unfamiliar settings. Building on these notions, Timothy and Boyd (2003) put forward the concept of 'personal heritage' when evaluating the factors that influence the tourist's motivation to visit a site and their perception and experience of it, defining this concept as those elements that individuals has had personal contact with through past experience or exposure which leads them to assign meaning and value to it (also see McCain and Ray, 2003).

Covent Garden – spatial dynamics through the looking glasses

Covent Garden can be related to different perspectives on urban areas for tourism and culture, adding to the complexity of the case study. From the physical and aesthetic points of view, the area responds to Aldous' (1992) notion of an urban village given its spatial configuration, built environment and mixed use of land that attracts a contrasting set of tourists. The clustering of different types of culture that range from high arts -such as opera and ballet at the Royal Opera House– to street entertainment and popular culture, confirm that the area can be seen as a cultural quarter (Roodhouse, 2006; Maitland, 2007;

Montgomery, 1995; Rains, 1999; Evans, 2003). This cultural vibrancy leads to increased

levels of trade and economic movement attracting individuals and organisations that work

in the creative industries matching Covent Garden's profile to that of a creative milieu

(Landry, 2000). From the leisure point of view, the area can be understood as an

entertainment district (Berkley and Thayer, 2000) because it not only clusters culture but

an array of features related to consumption, entertainment and relaxation such as pubs,

shops and eating and drinking facilities of different types – from quaint independently

owned businesses to high street global brands.

Mommas (2004) puts forward a useful approach to areas that encompass flagship

developments dedicated to the provision of culture in what he refers to as 'cultural

clusters'. Notwithstanding the fact that the author focuses his research efforts on novel

developments in the Netherlands, the notion is applicable to the case study as the

perception of Covent Garden might also be influenced by the presence of the Royal Opera

House. The significance of flagship developments is contextualised by Wing Tai Wai

(2004:245) who asserts that 'as cities strive for globality, flagship developments play

indispensable roles by signalling messages of economic development and cultural

vibrancy'. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the value assigned to an Opera

House is also strictly subject to the tourist's individual mechanisms of interpretation and

cultural awareness. Cultural flagships of this nature can be seen as architectural artefacts

that contribute visually to the urban landscape such as the Sydney Opera House (Colbert, 2003). But this value can also relate to the institution's cultural produce depending on the individual's interest, knowledge and exposure to it. Contemporary research tends to focus on novel flagship developments such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Plaza, 2000; Grodach, 2008), raising questions related to how a well-established and recently redeveloped Opera House can influence the tourist's perception and experience of place. The Royal Opera House was subjected to a £213 redevelopment scheme that aimed, amongst other purposes, to provide the building with an attractive architectural front that could potentially exert an influence on the way Covent Garden's tourists experience and perceive the area (Powell, 1999; Dixon, 1999 as stated by Binney in BBC, 1999).

Summary

The review of theoretical concepts related to urban areas for tourism and culture, the tourist's experience and the notion of cultural distance indicate that cultural tourism encompasses a wide range of categories of tourism that often overlap and complement each other. This is particularly the case in areas where cultural resources are clustered. There are different types of experiential opportunities in Covent Garden, some related to culture, from its heritage perspective to the provision of high and popular forms of art. Perceptions and experiences of place have also been linked to the tourists' background in terms of their socio-demographic profile as age, occupation, education and other

indicators exert an influence on their tourist activity. The cultural distance proposition places an emphasis on the tourists' origin and indicates that visitors from culturally distant places may seek deeper cultural experiences whereas tourists from proximate regions will focus their trips on leisure and entertainment. However, there is a lack of consensus of what a 'deep' or 'shallow' cultural experiences entail. This research makes a contribution to the understanding of these topics as the case study area is used by international tourists, domestic visitors and the local population. London's rich cultural resources attract a very diverse flow of visitors with different motivations to visit and from culturally different parts of the world legitimising the need to conduct these studies in the context of well-established urban tourist precincts which tend to be neglected by tourism research that seems to focus more on novel developments.

Understanding cultural tourism through a social constructivist approach

The conceptual framework developed for this study clearly suggests that the perception and experience of urban precincts and cultural tourism are intrinsic processes that are subject to an array of factors leading individuals to construct their realities subjectively. This indicates the need to focus on the person to understand what the tourist's interpretation mechanisms encompass, how they are formed and how they influence their perception and experience of places. Therefore, social constructivism was identified as the most suitable approach to undertake this study because it allows each person to

develop their own views of the world and explore how these shape their perceptions and experiences.

When assessing social constructivism as a research paradigm, Lengkeek (2001:178) asserts that 'we no longer regard reality as the direct reflection of the things around us. Individuals experience reality only through the filter of their ability to know and judge'. The author's proposition includes the notion of a filter that can be related to Graefke and Vaske's (1987) framework on the factors that affect and influence an individual's experiences (as stated in Ryan, 2002). Quinn Patton (2002) also supports this approach by indicating that people construct their own realities and find 'truths' according to their own mechanisms of interpretation. These 'truths' can be applied to a multi-faceted area such as Covent Garden whose users may see it as an entertainment district and focus their visit on leisure and commerce; or who may view it as a cultural quarter and experience it for cultural consumption. In this sense, 'realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions (...) dependent for their form and content on the person who holds them' (Hollinshead, 2004:76).

It is also important to note that the extent to which cultural distance exerts an influence on the tourist's perception and experience of place is central to this research and social constructivism also responds to the needs of this framework. Cultural distance is a notion

related to personal background and origin, indicating that social constructivisim is an approach that would allow exploring and understanding how each individual's personal heritage (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; McCain and Ray, 2003) influence the experience of cultural tourism. This is especially applicable to an urban precinct that is visited by individuals from different parts of the world and interpret their surroundings in unique ways. For this reason, preconceptions and assumptions could be made in terms of the tourist's level of engagement with the range of experiential opportunities in the area but these would not be helpful as they would restrict the ability to uncover new knowledge (Jennings, 2001). Hence, the anti-foundational position of social constructivism provides a flexible framework that enables each individual to develop their own views and constructions of reality in line with their subjective mechanisms of interpretation (Flick, 2002; Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). In the context of this study, this approach would yield novel findings related to what the area means to every tourist and in this way, elucidate why Coven Garden is given its variety of uses.

Research design

The conceptual framework developed for this study along with the implementation of the social constructivist paradigm as an approach to analyse the data underpinned the research design used to address the aim of this research. First-time and repeat international and domestic tourists were recruited throughout six different locations in different parts of

Covent Garden in order to understand how they assigned meaning and experienced the precinct leading to 306 interviews conducted. The sampling approach can be linked to the concept of convenience sampling because recruitment of these interviewees depended on how suitable the interviewing locations were and the tourists' willingness to participate in the study (Marshall, 1996).
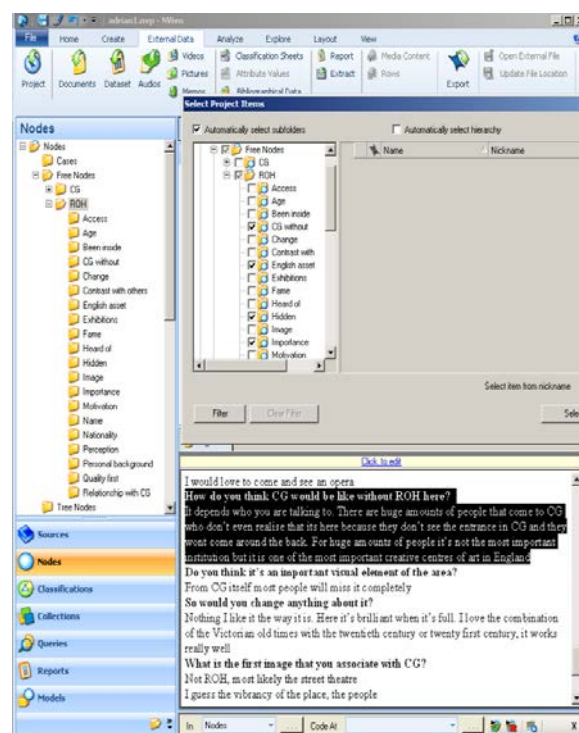
The interviewing locations included the popular *Covent Garden Piazza*, the centrally located *St Paul's Church* and the distinctive point where seven streets converge known as *Seven Dials*. Peripheral and less visited areas were also used as interviewing locations, such as *Broad Court* and *St Martin's Lane* which allowed collecting a contrasting set of views within different urban surroundings inside the area. Interviews were also conducted inside the *Royal Opera House* as the influence of this flagship building upon the tourist's perception and experience of place is a strong focal point of this study. It should be noted though that the Opera House interviewees were not attending a performance but visiting the building for its free exhibition and restaurant during daytime opening hours. The variety of interviewing locations is reflected in the eclectic nature of the data collected which harmonises effectively with the non-foundational approach used to conduct this research.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted as the data collection method given the flexibility required to ensure that participants expand their views in length (Arkesey and Knight, 1999; Finn et al, 2000). The questions asked focused on the factors that influence their perception of Covent Garden and how they utilise the area. These also enquired about whether or not the plays a role Royal Opera House in these processes and if so, in what ways. The respondents' socio-demographic profiles were also documented to understand the nature of the sample studied. Given Covent Garden's popularity as a tourist precinct, a large number of interviews were conducted but not all interviews yielded substantial data due to language limitations and in some cases, lack of willingness to develop views in length. The interviews were captured using a voice recorder, their length ranged from c.3 to c.45 minutes and they were each transcribed manually for the purpose of analysing them. This data was collected over a prolonged period of time from the beginning of spring to the late stages of the summer season at different times of the day and every day of the week.

The merits of using computer software to assist the process of analyzing qualitative data are widely accepted by several authors (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2000; Phelps et al., 2007). In view of this, the QSR N*Vivo software was identified as a useful tool for supporting the needs of this study given the high number of interviews conducted. Therefore and once transcribed, all interview material was uploaded into the program

facilitating this task. A dedicated and refined approach to coding data is a key success factor in qualitative studies (Babbie, 2004; Darlington and Scott, 2002). For this reason, the task of analysing this data consisted of two stages. In the initial coding stage, interview transcripts were treated as Nodes in N*Vivo, and subfolders were created for these nodes reflecting an initial set of codes. The second analytical stage consisted of re-reading data that had already been coded to understand how these codes were linked and the influence of age and nationality emerged at this stage as key issues to consider. This is noted as good analytical practice by many authors (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Bryman, 2004; Dey, 1993; Denscombe, 2007), who indicate that coding qualitative data is a reiterative process, and that it is not uncommon for an initial coding stage to lead to a second one where the relationships between the categories of an initial set are further explored. Figure 1 below illustrates the complexity of coding such an extensive amount of data and supports the clear focus of this paper on well-defined topics such as age and nationality as central to its arguments.

Figure 1 – Example of coding using N*Vivo

This paper focuses on a limited range of findings related to the influence of the interviewees' personal backgrounds on their perception and experience of place in line with the social constructivist adopted that studies the individual rather than the external world. However, many other themes related to –for example– the role that the built environment and urban design play in these processes also emerged as important findings and it is hoped that these will also be disseminated in future research papers.
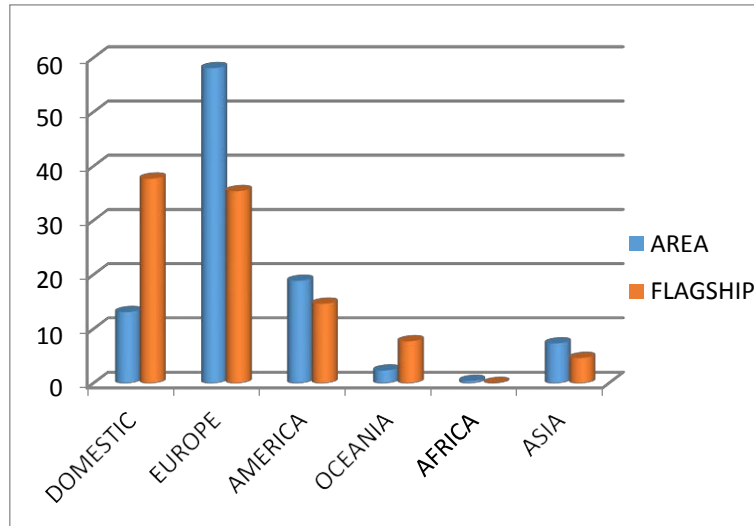
Evidence analysis and discussion

Socio-demographic profile: Nationality

213 semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the area with a further 93 inside the Royal Opera House resulting in 306 interviews conducted. These stemmed substantial qualitative data that will be used to support the findings in this section. However, the sample's socio-demographic profile was also captured to ensure clarity regarding their origin and age. Figure 2 below illustrates the sample's profile in terms of nationality according to the interview location (area and flagship building):

Fig. 2 - Interviewees' nationality

As seen above, 58% of the area's interviewees are of European origin (EU and rest of Europe excluding UK), followed by 19% from North and South America, 13% of the sample interviewed in the area consisted of domestic UK tourists and 9% from other parts of the world. On the other hand, 38% of the Opera House' respondents were domestic UK tourists, 35% of European origin (EU and rest of Europe excluding UK), 5% from North and South America; and 13% from other parts of the world. These figures suggest that the area has a stronger appeal to European tourists whereas the Opera Houses is mostly visited domestically by UK tourists.

The role of country of origin and associated factors

Many interviewees associated and evaluated different aspects of the area according to the similarities and differences that they hold with their places of origin. Their level of familiarity with certain elements of Covent Garden play a pivotal role in their enjoyment of place as they are either attracted or deterred depending on their previous experiences. This was also the case with their views and perceptions of the flagship, as many of them cited venues for the performing arts from their own countries as examples of their expectations of an Opera House. Similarly, they praised it as a building and as an institution because of the lack of cultural resources of this nature in their own countries: "*Its historical significance is the primal thing, especially coming from the US where there isn't any history. So the cultural significance of the building and what it represents (Doron, US)*". This indicates that the interviewees' interpretation of place can be the result of sensorial perception that interacts internally with the filter of their own cultural values. This process is directly associated with the individual's background, as some are excited about the new and unfamiliar whereas others escape it. Thus, tourists evaluate a tourist precinct according to the values determined by their previous experiences which can be linked to their age, previous travelling experience and nationality which influence their appraisals of place and perceptions and experience of it (Hollinshead, 2004).

It is also important to note that some Opera House interviewees heard of its work and were interested in visiting it because of performers from their countries that danced for the flagship's company: *"(I heard of the Royal Opera House) because the first ballerina is Spanish (Paula, Spain)"*. In addition, other interviewees noted that their countries of origin provide them with examples that make them compare the Opera House in Covent Garden to similar flagships in their own countries: *"I come from a town where there is a brilliant Opera House (...) so I am interested in seeing other Opera Houses to maybe compare (Iona, Germany)"*. Another interviewee commented on national cultural values that are likely to spark an interest in certain art forms and in the buildings that host them:

> *"La Scala is the cradle of opera, so opera is part of Italian culture; it goes to all levels of society, not only from the top sophisticated educated people but to the lowest level. You see people that do simple jobs that love opera, that know by heart all the words of each opera. So it's part of our culture. (Ricardo, Italy)"*.

These statements suggest that the interviewees' country of origin influence their interest in certain art forms and make them compare venues for the performing arts with similar buildings in their home towns. Conversely, the lack of cultural offer in some of the interviewees' countries of origin also constitutes an important element in their perception of the flagship, as another set of tourists expressed that their nationality makes them appreciate the Opera House, and London as a cultural destination, because of its rich

cultural resources in terms of performing arts. This evidence resonates McKercher's (2002) stance suggesting that tourists from culturally distant regions will seek to have deeper experiences of place because of their desire to gather new knowledge and experience unfamiliar cultures. In contrast, the culturally proximate domestic market for tourism will tend to focus on experiences based on leisure and entertainment as they are already acquainted with the cultural aspects of a precinct and arguably *'take them for granted'*.

However, the tourists' level of cultural awareness and motivation to visit will also play a fundamental role in their experience of place (McKercher and Chow So-Ming, 2001). These are also underpinned by their personal background through the process of cultural appraisal that determine their preferences. This is evidenced by the Opera House's stronger appeal to domestic tourists (according to the quantitative analysis of the sample's socio-demographic profile) who almost in all cases expressed a keen interest in opera and ballet. Likewise, international tourists interviewed inside the Opera House indicated that they visited the flagship because of their enthusiasm for high arts. In both cases, they used their cultural awareness to evaluate the importance of the Opera House for the area, the city and the country. This is also notable in the fact that opera and ballet are not originally English art forms, but the Opera House's interviewees were mostly domestic tourists with a fondness for this type of culture: *"I was taken to dancing classes by my mum"(Janet,*

over 60). Conversely, many international interviewees in the area indicated that they focused their visit on leisure, entertainment and relaxation in line with McIntosh and Goeldner (1990) assertions on this matter.

The contrasting appraisal processes that take the individual's cultural references to evaluate what is perceived are more closely related to the individual's connectivity with a site (Timothy, 1998; Timothy and Boyd, 2003; McCain and Ray,2003), indicating that the interviewees' interpretation of the area and the flagship is indeed determined by their cultural values. However, these are not only related to the interviewees' origin, but to personal preferences determined by past experiences and exposure to culture:

> *"My parents, we went to the Opera House a lot at home, we visited some museums too, planetariums. And nowadays we also take our grandsons (Norma, over 60)"*
> *"I was brought up on a lot of ballet and a lot of opera. I saw a lot of that when I was young" (Dean, UK)".*
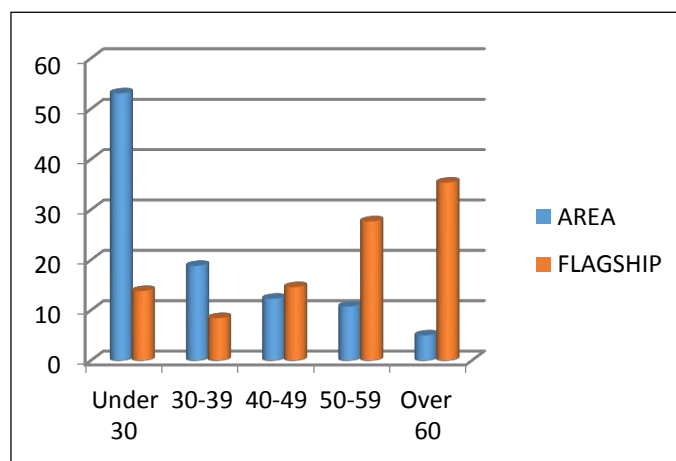
It is important to note that the scope of this study is very large which is also reflected in the extensive number of interviews conducted to inform it. This paper focuses on how the interviewees' personal background influences their experience and perception of place. However, there are many other factors that also play important roles in these processes. Namely, the influence of other tourists in the area (Phillimore and Godson, 2004) and

certainly the built environment itself (Hall and Page, 2014) which are fundamental notions that are worthy of analysing in depth in separate pieces work which is an issue that defines the limitations and boundaries of this paper.

Socio-demographic profile: Age

As a result of the quantitative analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the sample used to inform this study, another indicator that emerged as an important influence on the interviewees' perception and experience of the area and the flagship was their age. Figure 3 below illustrates the sample's age distribution according to interview location (area and flagship building):

Figure 3 - Interviewees' age

The majority of tourists interviewed in the area belonged to the younger sector below 30 years of age (53%), followed by 19% of respondents between the ages of 30 to 39, 12%

between 40 and 49, 11% between 50 and 59, and 5% over the age of 60. On the other hand, Opera House respondents belonged to the older age groups. The majority of these were over the age of 60 (35%), 28% were between the ages of 50 to 59, 15% were between 40 to 49 years of age, only 8% were between 30 and 39, and 14% belonged to the younger age groups below 30. This evidence indicates that the area has a stronger appeal to younger tourists whereas the flagship tends to be visited by the older age groups according to the statistical analysis of the sample's profile.

The role of age and associated factors

Many interviewees noted that the experiential opportunities available in the area have a stronger appeal for a younger market, with some older respondents observing that the vibrancy of Covent Garden, particularly of its central Piazza may be appealing to younger crowds relating to the notion of the entertainment district (Berkley and Thayer, 2000):

> "*Because of so many people visiting it seems like it's on alert, it's constantly moving, it's not still. That's something that I like, at least at this age I enjoy. Maybe later on I would like something more quiet (Nicosia, 30-39)*".

Similarly, other interviewees noted that the presence of large numbers of younger tourists contributes to the area's vibrancy, which is not always regarded as a positive element of their experience:

"Nowadays I simply come here for the opera and then make my way back (…).
Being retired and especially with the financial crunch, just going around looking
at things that you may or may not want to buy is not something that interests me
particularly. I think it would probably interest the much younger rather than the
retired population (Anna, over 60)"

"Is there anything that you dislike about it? *It's just rather crowded, I'm sure*
you generation doesn't mind but mine does (Doris, over 60)".

On the other hand, many interviewees recognised that the array of experiences in the area
attracts an 'eclectic mix' of tourists of all ages, which adds to its cosmopolitan ambience:

"I think no matter what age, it's got a lot of appeal. You have got stuff that would
be great for young children, you got places to eat, a lot of multiculture here. You
got pubs for the older children, so it has a lot to offer (Laura, 40-49)".

Further probing was applied throughout the interviews to understand how these tourists'
age affects their perception and experience of place, with some indicating that as they
grow older, they become more perceptive of and receptive of their surrounding:

*"**As you grow older your expectations of the place change?** Yes I think so. You*
see other things. You see them in another way. You see them more quietly, more

at ease. So you see more (...) But in another way, more receptive, receiving,

accepting. More than chasing. Said the old man (Marcel, 50-59)".

This is also evident in the fact that older interviewees tended to give a more comprehensive account of their experience of London and Covent Garden, providing more detailed answers about how they perceived and interpreted the area. For example, an interviewee in the area who was under 30 highlighted that her previous visits were focused on *'candy and dolls'* but as she grows older she is also *'checking out the pubs'*. In contrast, another interviewee over the age of 60 provided a detailed account of his appreciation for the area's heritage using the case of the now closed National Sporting Club, and his desire to impart that part of history to his grandson. Similarly, an interview conducted with mother and daughter enquired about the first image that they associated with the area. The mother indicated that it was the Opera House's Corinthian architecture in Bow Street, whereas the daughter mentioned the modern 'Bridge of Aspiration' featuring glazed intervals supported by a complex aluminium structure in Floral Street, with both interviewees recognising the bias that their age exerts on their opinions. These contrasts evidence that the perception and interpretation of the area, along with the experiences that its tourists seek, are sometimes subject to their age groups (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; McCain and Ray, 2003; Milman, 1998).

It was also evident that age plays a role in the interviewees' interest in the Royal Opera House as the majority of the flagship's interviewees were over 60 years of age, and some of them recognised that the building may be of more interest to older generations:

> "*The Royal Opera House is not for pupils the age of my pupils, they are 14 years old so that is really too far off their world. They are too young. (…) they want to buy things, they want to go shopping and go home and say I bought this in London. (Danielle, Belgium)*".

Notably, an interviewee explained how the empty nest lifecycle stage improved her financial prospects and allowed her to experience more expensive art forms, further illustrating the relationship between age and interest in the Opera House:

> "*I like opera, I retired in 2004 and I always went to the opera in Berlin but I decided to spread my wings and go to other places (…) since I retired in 2004, my kids are all grown up so I can spend my money on myself for a change and this is how I am spending (it) (Anne, Ireland)*".

Many respondents noted that they are more receptive of their surroundings when they are older, seeking more inquisitive and informative experiences, which can also be understood as deeper as illustrated by the following statement: "***Do you think London has changed?*** *No, we have changed (…) We are more micro, looking more micro (in)*

more detail (Rene, 50-59)." The older interviewees were more likely to visit specific attractions in the area such as the Opera House, St Paul's Church or attending a performance elsewhere. Younger interviewees in the area were likely to cite more than one motivation noting that they perceive Covent Garden as a whole and not as a cluster of sites of interest, leading to more varied experiences. This data suggests that visits to specific attractions are more likely to be purposeful, as opposed to the experience of Covent Garden's shops and street performers that result from roaming, exploring and discovering the area (Guachalla, 2013). However, the older age groups are more likely to explore the tourist precinct more inquisitively, soaking in its atmosphere and discovering its opportunities instead of "*running from one place to the other*" and "*ticking boxes*" (McKercher and Chow So-Ming, 2001) when they are younger .

A possible explanation is that older tourists are more experienced and better travelled, which leads them to have deeper, more informative experiences. In some cases, they have already experienced the most notorious areas and attractions of a destination and its' precincts. An inexperienced tourist, likely to belong to a younger age group, tends to visit the most notable attractions and areas for tourism as indicated by travel guides and other media (the musical film 'My Fair Lady' was often referred to). Therefore, it is evident that the role of first time/repeat visits is an important issue to consider and gives scope for further studies to analyse the impact of this topic in their perception and experience

of place. This finding relates to the notion of psychological and cognitive distance, identified by Milman (1998) as an underpinning factor on the nature of a traveller's experience and perception of place according to their age and lifecycle stage.

The market place area and its street entertainers feature in media as distinctive elements of the area. These attractions serve as signs and markers, as suggested by MacCannell (1999), and succeed in attracting a set of tourists that are not driven by a strong interest or motivation other than getting to know these high profile sights/sites (Kushner and Brooks, 2000). The more experienced and older tourists tend to explore less popular attractions by roaming around the area and discovering unexpected features, described as *"gems off the beaten track"*. They seek a deeper understanding of place once they have experienced the typical and main stream aspects of a precinct, leading to a more informative engagement. The better informed approach of the older tourists' experience of place is illustrated by interviewees in cultural attractions such as the Opera House or St Paul's Church being more inquisitive about the sites' heritage and history. Older interviewees tended to develop more elaborate and explanatory accounts of their perception of place in terms of the area's history and heritage, indicating the importance of their previous knowledge of place in their present perception and experience (Milman, 1998). This knowledge is acquired through previous visits, confirming that older tourists are more likely to have gathered these experiences leading them to seek more exploratory,

informative and educational experiences of a precinct. This in itself, responds very well to Smith's (2007) approach to traditional forms of cultural tourism.

Conclusions

The different conceptual approaches on urban areas for cultural tourism used to establish a theoretical framework for this study (Aldous, 1992; Roodhouse, 2006; Maitland, 2007; Montgomery, 1995; Rains, 1999; Evans, 2003; Landry, 2000; Berkley and Thayer, 2000) have been relevant and applicable to understand the role of culture and urban design in the perception and experience of the case study. Similarly, the role of cultural flagships in this type of precincts as highlighted by Mommas (2004); Wing Tai Wai (2004); Plaza, (2000) and Grodach, (2008) has proved useful to appraise the significance of these developments on the perception and experience of tourist precincts. However, it is worth noting that the core messages conveyed by these studies focus on 'the external' such as the built environment and land functionality. There is still a considerable gap in knowledge regarding the multifaceted nature of the interactions between the 'real world' and the intricate network of inner processes leading tourists to construct their own realities. In view of this, it can be concluded that the characteristics of an individual's life story shape the way in which they perceive the world and experience it; and in return, it is the world itself which engenders these life stories.

The association between the interviewee's socio demographic variables with their perception and experience of the area acquires a complex, yet more comprehensive dimension when it is understood as a process of cultural appraisal. An individual's personal background along with their previous experiences and preferences leads them to perceive the area and the flagship from different perspectives. This implies that tourists perceive and evaluate areas and buildings differently according to their background and are attracted to the familiar as it provides them with a sense of safety and assurance, and to the unfamiliar as it excites their desire to learn and experience the unknown, if such a longing exists (McKercher and Chow So-Ming, 2001). The area's distinctive urban environment and the array of activities that take place throughout its different locations accentuate the impact of these processes, making of Covent Garden a peculiar case study. It should be noted, however, that these findings are applied to a long-standing area for cultural tourism that was not developed as such and therefore its implications are limited to case studies of this nature. Other areas that have been intentionally planned for the development of tourism may exert stronger cues with the potential of overriding the tourist's inner filters of interpretation. However, this in itself would be subject to a social constructivist process of acceptance.

Given the evidence captured and analysed, Covent Garden's flexibility and plasticity allows the tourist to interpret it intrinsically. Its organic development, exacerbated by its

popularity and centrality, was not laid out to signify a specific meaning. The Royal Opera House at its core is the ultimate example of how its different elements mean and serve different functions to the diverse assortment of tourists in the area. For some, it is the heart and soul of Covent Garden and the pinnacle of high performing arts in the country. Whereas for others, it is a plain and subtle architectural artefact amidst the sights and sounds of its vibrant Piazza. But the relationship between the area and the flagship is strong because of its positive input into the tourist's perception of London as a destination for culture. However, this, and all processes explored throughout this study are strictly subject to the individual's cultural appraisal of object and place.

Limitations of the study

This paper has presented a limited set of findings relating to how the interviewees' age and nationality influence their perception and experience of place. However, there are many other factors that play fundamental roles in these processes. Such is the case of the built environment that stimulates the visitors' senses along with other sensorial stimuli such as the presence of street entertainers and a strong hold of food and beverage providers in every corner of this precinct. In this sense, this study's boundaries and limitations are clear and in line with the social constructivist approach adopted. It is also clear that given the high levels of tourist activity and the successful recruitment of an extensive number of interviewees, it would have been feasible to use more detailed

quantitative tools to address the overall aim of this research. This has only been done in the context of the participant's country of origin and age indicating that there is ample scope for conducting future studies that would capture other socio-demographic variables such as level of education or occupation for example along with other recommendations for further studies as presented below.

Recommendations for further research

In order to further expand and apply the implications of this study, it is recommended that similar research is conducted to understand the perception and experience of other well-established precincts and flagships for tourism and culture. Considering London's strong cultural sector that has a wide array of historical attractions in its tourism portfolio, usually located in urban areas, future studies should aim to understand how these attractions interact and effectively influence the area's perception and experience by the tourists they attract. Other flagship developments in London's urban landscape such as the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square invite further research in terms of how the spaces around it are constructed by the individual and the interactions between the built environment and the social dimensions that these spaces acquire because of the people that visit it. The National Theatre is also a flagship development of interest because of its waterfront based location in London's Southbank, suggesting that research efforts could be made to assess how tourists use the precinct and contrast the presence of this landmark

building with other developments that shape the urban landscape such as the nearby

London Eye and Houses of Parliament, to name a few.

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