

Improving the adaptive capacity of historic urban neighbourhoods with, despite of or at the expense of tourists

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Abstract

Cultural heritage, not only makes places attractive to tourism, but is a significant contributor to urban identity and place attachment for residents. Older neighbourhoods, through their walkable scale, diversity of uses and tenures support better community relationships and contribute to urban resilience. Tourism, while an important economic contributor, places pressure not only on cultural heritage but also on urban and community infrastructure. Moreover, conditions of overtourism, threaten to disrupt established networks and engender conditions of temporality and fragmentation for the local population, thus reducing the capacity for resilience. Often emerging as small scale stressors, disruptions triggered by tourism can slowly shift conditions over thresholds that adversely impact local wellbeing and equitable access to resources. This paper argues that the tourism industry and its multiple players, cultural heritage management and urban resilience planning need to become better integrated, so as to safeguard heritage, support local communities and to improve the capacity of historic neighbourhoods to adapt to ongoing changes caused by or linked to climate change.

Key words: overtourism, urban resilience, historic neighbourhoods, tipping points

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1. Introduction

In the context of an unfolding climate emergency, cities are emerging as key centres for action, and city-scale policies and initiatives are increasingly becoming the focus of UN Habitat and other agencies (Zeiderman et al. 2017). At the same time the impacts cultural tourism is being felt in much larger cities, compared to the small historic towns that were previously seen to take the brunt of overtourism, and present different and often more complex management challenges in these contexts.

Beyond making places attractive to tourism, cultural heritage makes a significant contribution to urban identity and place attachment for residents. Older neighbourhoods through their walkable scale, diversity of uses and tenures support better community relationships and contribute to urban resilience. The contribution strong urban networks make to community wellbeing and in responding to adverse situations, including disasters and major climate events, is now recognised (Zhang and Li 2018). Tourism, while an important economic generator, places pressure not only on cultural heritage but also on urban and community infrastructure. Furthermore, conditions of overtourism, threaten to disrupt established networks and contribute to situations of temporality and fragmentation for the local population, thus reducing the capacity for resilience.

Tourism can be both an opportunity and a threat to improving the resilience of historic urban areas. But, long accepted methods of tourism management are no longer sufficient to address the issues emerging from a rapidly evolving and increasingly volatile tourism industry and concurrent patterns of rapid urban growth. In many cities, action is only being taken once tipping points have been reached and a public outcry is significantly loud. This is all too often too late to safeguard community wellbeing or to reverse the changes in the urban environment that have been brought about by tourism. The purpose of this paper is to position the role of cultural tourism management in the context of resilience planning and disaster preparedness for historic urban neighbourhoods.

2. Conditions of urban resilience

Resilience, in the urban context means ‘the ability of a city or urban system to withstand a wide array of shocks and stresses’ (Leichenko 2011, 164), whilst resilience planning seeks stability and diversification, particularly of urban economic functions, in order to cope with unexpected change (Zhang and Li 2018). Resilience studies identify both shocks (e.g. extreme climate events) and stressors, which are more gradual but persistent changes as considerations for resilience planning (Leichenko 2011).

Urban resilience is multi-scalar (regional, city and neighbourhood level) and depends on interconnectedness across scales and sectors (Ernstson et al. 2010). The urban neighbourhood, although the smallest unit on the scale, is also where the most human interaction is observed. The importance of the capacity of a community to come back after a shock and the role social factors play in urban resilience planning are increasingly recognised (Leichenko 2011; Zhang and Li 2018).

The strength of a community is often considered in terms of wellbeing and measured through indicators such as the quality of housing, the affordability of housing, liveability of neighbourhoods (Zhang 2013). Some of the common characteristics of historic neighbourhoods, such as walkability and mixed use, are also characteristics associated with liveable places (Evans 2014). Liveability is also a condition of urban districts' ability to succeed economically (O'Brien 2012). It is also these characteristics that make historic urban districts attractive to tourism.

While participation and inclusion emerge as wellbeing and resilience indicators, the overriding political desire for economic betterment is often at the cost of social betterment (Zhang 2013). Furthermore, it should be noted that fluid urban populations and their fragmented interests mean that places often have less of a singular social identity making social cohesion and inclusion complex issues to tackle (Khosla 2015; Blake et al. 2007).

3. Tourism impacts on resilience factors

Tourism is rarely classed as one of the risks or disasters that necessitate resilience planning, yet the gentle erosion of social wellbeing and reduction of economic diversity can adversely impact urban resilience in the face of catastrophic events. Tourism may not be a direct threat, but can be identified as a 'stressor' that weakens some of the systems that support resilience.

Cultural tourism in the urban context has significantly expanded over the past few decades from small city centre historic cores to encompass older neighbourhoods in general, former industrial districts and others that attract interest for their ethnic or creative communities, sometimes gaining 'hip neighbourhood' status. From an economics point of view, tourism supports economic diversification at city level and a larger footprint of visitor activity supports the spread the benefits. It also means that the impacts of tourism are more widely experienced across a city and its population.

Tourism has not been immune to the rapid speed of change that characterizes phenomena from urbanisation to climate change in the present day. Enabled by new technologies and social media, an (invariably unplanned) popularity of a destination can be achieved in a short period of time. Meanwhile, market disruptors such as cheap airlines or Big Tech supported interventions such as Uber or Airbnb have made a significant impact on urban tourism (Sherwood 2019). The combination of these factors has seen larger cities becoming adversely impacted by tourism and oversaturation, in ways previously associated with small to medium sized historic towns (Orbaşlı 2000). A growing number of larger European cities including Berlin, Amsterdam and Barcelona are regularly cited as becoming overwhelmed or impacted by the pressures of tourism (Milano et al. 2018).

Impacts such as rises in property prices, and a general lack of affordable housing as the rental markets shift towards more lucrative short term lets are felt across a city. As attractive, and often historic, neighbourhoods are taken over by tourism uses, local residents and the businesses that support them are pushed out to the periphery, disrupting established social networks. Living further out, increases commuting times to jobs and central amenities,

eroding quality of life for many local residents, as well as increasing the demand for infrastructure.



Figure 1: As city centre uses turn exclusively to tourism, local communities become marginalized and pushed to the urban periphery, ultimately causing the urban resilience infrastructure to become fragmented. Image of Warsaw in Poland, taken by the author, 2017.

In terms of urban governance, rapid cycles of change and potentially precipitous escalation of impacts, and the entry of bigger global players such as Airbnb, require new perspectives on governance, planning and management structures as well as on political alliances. At the neighbourhood level, the local life that is often the very attraction of historic districts is hollowed out as prices increase and amenities are lost. The recent unprecedented downturn in tourism in wake of the Covid-19 virus has exposed those still living in central districts to the realisation that they have no neighbours and no community, at the very time when community mutual support networks have been most needed.

4. Thresholds and edge conditions

Where private sector investors have gained ground as tourism is prioritised as an economic sector, this has often been at the cost of investment in communal life (Garcia and Claver 2003). As with other environmental stressors, these slow variables eventually push systems over a threshold and generate tipping points, where either irreversible change is being recorded or the strength of the public outcry threatens the political status quo (Ernstson et al. 2010). Venice is an example of where multiple tipping points (ecological, social) have been reached and the lagoon city has been so hollowed out that a point of no return has been reached with regard to the resumption of an urban life centred on residents' priorities. Barcelona, one of Europe's most popular urban tourism destinations attractive to visitors for

its 'accessible public space and sociability', has experienced a shift in investments and urban improvements increasingly being focused on tourists' rather than residents needs (Garcia and Claver 2003, 113). The qualities that made Barcelona a liveable city have come to service a transient tourist population, while adversely impacting on residents' wellbeing.

The triggers, or stressors, are increasingly evident, but tipping points harder to determine as each place and community's realities will be different. Furthermore, the processes of urban heritage conservation are highly complex, and often an interplay between spatial scales and decision making hierarchies that are not necessarily linked (Zhang 2013). The global nature of 'disruptors' and the multi-scalar and at times informal nature of many tourism businesses adds further to the complexity and the interplay between those who benefit from and those who are adversely impacted by tourism growth.

5. Managing tourism to support resilience

The climate emergency is beginning to teach us that short term economic growth may need to be overlooked in favour of longer term climate resilience action. Most recently, the loss of mass tourism in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic has made many urban tourism destinations reconsider the impacts of tourism (Smith and Ripp 2020). Although the urban policy and management process is fragmented and complex, it is essential that its various and diverse players come together to improve urban resilience in the context of tourism management (Zhang 2013).

The biggest challenge is to be able to pre-empt tipping points, and be better informed of the nature of stressors and variables that have the potential to push systems over a threshold. This will require disciplinary experience beyond the bounds of urban conservation and tourism management. Scenario planning techniques used for climate change analysis, levels of acceptable change methodologies from nature conservation, and more effective use and interrogation of big data for real-time and dynamic analysis are just some approaches that could be adapted. All will require collaboration amongst diverse players, and must ensure that local voices are heard (Zhang 2013).

A shift in urban investment and development that places social and environmental benefits as primary goals, will also support tourism management practices. Sustainable tourism practices that prioritise locals and take a wellbeing-centred approach to policy and planning and encourage local participation are best placed to identify and deliver on shared objectives. Ultimately, a place that works for and is good for locals, will also be attractive to tourists. Tourism and tourists often have a higher adaptive capacity than urban places, and they will undoubtedly adapt to changes brought about in the urban context that better serve sustainability and resilience goals.

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