

Culture with a Twist Challenge for the 'Land of Miracles'

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'New ways to thinking cultural tourism' was the theme of the annual conference of the European Cultural Tourism Network (ECTN), fittingly held in the Cultural Capital 2011 from 23-24th September. The conference was organized by Centre of expertise for tourism and experience management in Turku Touring. In particular, it explored 'culture with a twist' – generating the roots of society so that its members may harvest its fruits. Culture affords us to hang onto certain values. That is especially important in turbulent times, when we are confused about our direction.

Within this framework, a cultural tourism perspective provides a reference point from which to enquire whether a particular development square with our values?' In order to fully leverage the potential which cultural tourism offers, Finland needs to develop partnerships and collaborations at all levels, local, regional, national and European, between private- and public civil partners to tap creativity as a new means to 'nurture' constructed advantage. In the network society it is the next paradigm after competitive advantage.

National government agencies play an important role in the process of innovation and learning diffusion. I am a great admirer of the leadership the Finnish national government displayed to foster innovation, education and higher education. It was therefore, to my amazement, that Mrs Häyhä, who represented the view of the Finnish national government, remarked that there's no need for the development of tourism along specific themes. Instead, she opined that tourism is best served by generic development. More specifically, she meant to say that there is no need to expend efforts to develop cultural tourism, beside other thematic areas such as nature tourism, meetings, incentives, conventions, exhibits (MICE), etc.

However, the generic approach to tourism development she suggests, contradicts several salient market trends that have been underway for the last decade. First, individuals who are embarking on a particular trip are driven by intrinsic reasons particularly, specific experiences. 'Done this' and, 'Seen that' people are increasingly in search of authentic experiences. In that regard hotel rooms, planes, trains or buses can be regarded as a 'derived demand'.

Second, consequent to the individualization within society a market has emerged of many different traveler types, with needs that may alter to fit specific situations. Their interest is often triggered by different media, including mobile telephones, social media and "themes" that enable the matching of services and contents, which meet the expectations of specific traveler types.

Third, under conditions of intense competition there is a significant need amongst vendors and places to distinguish themselves in an 'ocean of offerings.' Fourth, tou-

rism is about contents, i.e., storytelling which afford a host community to connect with potential, distant and unknown visitors. As a social arena few, if any, host community is self contained and separate from other arenas. Here impacts of modern information and communication systems, in which Finland has taken an innovative lead, is crucial for the future success in Finnish tourism because it allows for spontaneous, technology - mediated interactions of global proportions. It affords the Cultural Capital 2011 to builds on its traditional role of gateway, beyond historical conceptions of social space.

In short, the construction and transformation of human values occurs in emerging cultural networks. New experiences and products demanded by tourists and consumers often entail environmental pressures, new technologies, new quality standards, and new notions what is authentic and 'fake'. Such changes have contributed to the segmentation of the tourism market and the emergence of different cultural styles of consumption. By means of content analysis, for example, different linkages and interactions can be blueprinted and implemented between consumers, producers, marketing organizations, regional, national and supranational agencies (e.g. EU). In this sense, cultural tourism should be defined in a broader realm. Beyond museums and symphony orchestras, however important these may be. Culture is a reflection of everyday life, a way of living...that helps to distinguish one human community from others. Cultural tourism plays thereby an important role; particularly, as a vehicle to help us celebrate our "unity in diversity."

Cultural tourism refers to the co-existence culture and tourism within a community context - urban or rural. The responsibility for whatever it took to cultivate and maintain culture was shared by government (e.g. infrastructure/public services), business (e.g. commercial activity) and non-profit services (e.g. performing arts). If something needed fixing, people with influence assumed the responsibility and stepped in to lead the effort.

With borders dissolving literally and conceptually across the world the influence of outside forces comes to the fore. It becomes a central point of contention in the debate what to preserve and what to change. Tourism has become an economic sector characterized by fierce competition, where the balance of power in the decision making process has swung to 'outsiders'.

Alongside other cultural sectors, including music and entertainment, tourism has become a global phenomenon, regardless of national boundaries. Significant steering of the tourism supply chain is in the hands of transnational corporations. Their business model is designed around the principle that tourists leave home to see things that are 'out-of-the-ordinary'.

This perspective depends on imagery, 'the gaze', a visible field marked off in advance. For example, a group of vendors, the British Tourist Board, souvenir and postcard providers and the publishers of a myriad of tourist guides, all conspire to direct a tourist to visit a particular attraction say the Tower Bridge in London.

As a consequence the tourist can be literally trapped in a 'Hermeneutic cycle', from the Greek which refers to the science of interpretation. It is the 'gaze' so dominant in 'mass tourism', which reinforces the existing status hierarchies between tourist and

locals, in terms of what is worth seeing and what is not. In that sense tourism may be likened to a form of ‘totalitarian control’ under the guise of ‘pseudo-freedom’.

The multiplication, rise of ‘cheap labor’ in emerging economies and price competition are factors which afforded millions of people to visit distant places. Future tourist streams will be increasingly titillated by writers of promotional literature, who are paid to create fantasies that host residents were neither socially willing nor economically able to provide.

The result of such pre-fabrication approach increased alienation rather than furthering education. The homogenized international style of tourism may be reassuring to mass travelers, but contributes little to enhancing the livability of host communities. Decision making by outsiders in board rooms has caused the tour experience to turn diluted, cuisine unrelated to the host society, cultural entertainment divorced from folk roots and commoditized hotel service. Or, quantity transformed the quality dimension of travel.

However, the era of digitalization, in which Finland features as ‘thought’ leader, affords new opportunities for organizations and people that are beyond the current capabilities of mass-tourism. Indeed, the re-invention of place identity, space and social formation invites a re-think of relationships, the role of cultural tourism as a medium to stimulate memorable host-guest encounters and the presence of Finnish regions in a globalizing society.

The current crisis puts significant pressure on leaders in government and business alike. But, also affords them an opportunity to identify ways to come out stronger, instead of merely surviving. The practice of ‘inside-in’ focused thinking and acting contributes little if any to explore appropriate policies to support creativity, knowledge and service – the essence of the future economy – for adoption during and after the crisis.

Finnish business organizations compete within a worldwide arena. Visitors are attracted to a place that has special qualities. Due to their narrow perspective too many places remain little more than carbon copies of one another. If visitors are to continue to be attracted to a place, two things must happen: First, they must identify and make visible their special qualities. Second, they need to institute governance, that is to say a manner and system of managing to direct, coordinate and consult the actions, affairs, policies and functions of multiple actors.

Traditional policy formulation and implementation has been organized around win-lose models fueled by hard measurement. Presently, cooperation is largely confined to supporting mature industry associations, which focus on common concerns, such as tax rules, restrictive labor regulations and access to finance and setting common standards.

Against, this technocratic backdrop and the economic challenges that plague Finland, cultural tourism appears an unlikely sector to source ideas from to fuel global competitiveness. Furthermore, the cultural tourism sector lacks scientific credibility. For instance, it has no standard methodology to determine the special qualities of place. Presently, different academic disciplines, including geography, urban and regional planning and environmental psychology are experimenting with a variety of techniques.

Lately, most interesting initiatives have come from the domain of music, particularly, Jose Antonio Abreu founder of the Venezuelan Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra and Gareth Malone who have demonstrated how music contributes to sense of community.

In the present ‘technological mood’, problems that place organizations – on municipal, regional, national level or supra-national level (EU) – encounter show up as resources for ongoing ordering. In that regard, there is an oversupply of place organizations that allocate their resources to strengthen work routines. Instead of leveraging their creative capacity to represent and provide return on investment on their cultural attainment, just like brands investments or tourism do.

Against the background of increasing urbanization the felt need for focusing on big is better seems appropriate. But does it make sense for Helsinki to compete head-on with the agglomeration advantages, derived from capital and physical plant, concentrated in Berlin, London and Paris? Instead the ‘casino of technology’ offers Finland a leader in ‘health, education and higher education’ and ‘innovation’ the potential for the successful exploitation of its cultural sources that have yielded it increasing returns in learning effects, network effects and interaction effects of business processes.

Competing may be likened to playing ‘Russian roulette’, wherein place organizations are at the mercy of erratic, borderless market. But this is not the whole truth. Provided that decision makers understand the sources and consequences of increasing returns, they should be capable of selecting a means of governance. That is to say, a consensus building process in which affected groups participate to identify and organize new and lucrative regional and national specializations. But the regional specialization of economic clusters creates economic inequalities that in turn generate regional imbalances. This is as much the case in the USA, Russia, China and the UK. Hinterland areas decline and create economic dependency, social exclusion and poverty. High taxes, social-inclusion policies may be unacceptable to the decision makers of large corporations.

Due to its simplicity and cohesiveness, the ‘village’ metaphor harbors a model for the governance of human affairs that is more flexible and sustainable. This model of the village advocates the principle of ‘designing co-existence’, a greater collaboration and understanding – through coherent communication among multiple stakeholders. Being a member of what I coined a ‘cultural enterprise’ they share in the costs and benefits, have distinct roles and expectations and would be rewarded, depending on their contributions.

Perhaps as a consequence of globalization and the ‘graying’ of the population there is a growing interest in authenticity across European markets. There is also a great demand for quality. Quality is in the eye of the beholder. So, step one is to understand what that means. Quality cannot be imposed through a program. It is concerned with process. It is attitudinal rather than functional a perspective on life that grows out of organizational culture.

Presently, many government agencies, including tourism organizations, are involved in place branding. However, they cannot overlook that the quest for quality is a matter of culture.

An organizational culture that spans three levels of governance: national institutions, public/private organizations, typically housed in a Destination Management Organization (DMO) and networks of private organizations. The first defines the national identity and plan the national touristic strategy. The second formulates the regional system strategy and develops the coordination mechanism to implement touristic strategy. At the third level local touristic project are defined and managed and where appropriate linked with the regional touristic strategy so as to leverage synergistic effects.

The tourism development agenda is largely driven by an architectural dictum: Form follows function. In the emerging co-creation space, the basis for product development alters. The challenge shifts from meeting different sets of specifications to seeking new ways to engage with tourists and partners who jointly create value in a sustainable manner.

The relationship between culture, tourism and the visitor may be viewed as a journey; from co-existence to exploitation and finally the staging of culture as imaginary co-creative space. With preparations underway Cultural Capital 2011 signals the 'Land of Miracles' entry into the third stage of imaginary, co-creative space. The quest for quality through cultural tourism is compatible with growth. It concerns the generation of green growth embedded in the roots and fruits of host communities across Finland connected to the global society.