

Sustainability, Heritage and Tourism in The Three Historic Towns

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Research Note

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Introduction

The goal of the project LiviHeri, Living with Cultural Heritage, is to learn how to live, develop and cherish a historic town while preserving its characteristic environment and liveability.

The partner towns – Rauma in Finland, Visby in Sweden and Kuldiga in Latvia – are historically connected by the Baltic Sea trade routes, have been permanently inhabited since the Medieval Period and are lively, bustling towns today. All of them are also either World Heritage Sites or included in a Tentative List (UNESCO World Heritage List, 1991, 1995; Tentative Lists, 2011). A joint feature for all the partners, in addition to World Heritage, is that the built heritage which is the key value in these towns, is mostly private. This fact multiplies the amount of key stakeholders; it is not sufficient to cooperate inside the public sector. The private sector, which consists of local house owners, entrepreneurs, NGO's and other actors, needs to be involved in every step.

The hypothesis, on which the project is built on, is that the project goal can be reached in a public-private partnership and with community-based activities.

The starting point for all actions and activities is natural and cultural heritage and sustainable tourism. The project also builds up the capacity for conserving the outstanding universal values recognized as World Heritage values in Old Rauma, Visby and Kuldiga with the support of all partners.

Firstly, in the LiviHeri model sustainable tourism is seen as a mechanism that can connect cultural heritage and people. Secondly, sustainability is understood as a holistic approach to society, environment and development as Julian Agyeman et al. defines it:

“Sustainability cannot be simply a ‘green’, or ‘environmental’ concern, important though ‘environmental’ aspects of sustainability are. A truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman et al., 2002, p. 78).

With this approach, sustainable tourism connects cultural heritage and people, as well local people as visitors, in a way which enhances equal and just (Agyeman, 2002, 2003, 2013; Agyeman, Bullard & Evan, 2016) possibilities to access these historic towns. Heritage tourism and the prosperity gained of it is desired, but the scale needs to be fitted in a way that allows the local community to still inhabit the town centre permanently. In other words, many tourist attractions should be activities and elements provided by the mundane town life, for and/or by the local community.

Thirdly, in LiviHeri model historic town is understood as a developing, combined work of nature and of man – as a historic urban landscape¹ – which needs to be experienced within the cultural framework of those who have created and sustained them (Rodwell, 2010; Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, 2008; see also Dumitrescu, 2015). The objective of the activities is also to build

¹ Vienna Memorandum on “World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape”. UNESCO 2005. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2005/whc05-15ga-inf7e.pdf> Accessed 21.8.2017

public-private partnership (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006; Alexander, Andrachuk & Armitage, 2016) and resilience² for historic urban landscape against disturbance or shocks, which changes in the surrounding society, economy or ecosystem may cause (Biggs, Schlüter, & Schoon, 2015).

Julian Agyeman (2012) has also stated, that we have knowledge about how to enhance sustainability in all of its domains; we are just not doing it. As theories for environmental education show (Palmer, 1998; Jeronen & Kaikkonen, 2001; Palonen & Koskinen, 2005), increase of environmental knowledge, awareness and sensitivity promotes the will to act for the environment, as well for the natural as for the cultural one. The community-based approach (Berkes, 2004) of the project pursues to enhance local peoples' cultural identity and sense of belonging. One method for empowering the local community is to contribute to creation of economic opportunities. In this project the objective is to search for such opportunities, which support local community's possibilities to gain economically from their environmental knowledge, holistic conservation of natural and cultural environment and of cultural identity with sustainable tourism.

The area known today as Old Rauma has always been the centre of the town of Rauma. It has retained its medieval, irregular street and plot layout in spite of many attempts at modernization. Inscribed into the World Heritage List in 1991, the site's popularity among international tourists keeps increasing. Kuldiga was a major Hanseatic town. The old wooden town of Kuldiga is still the functional centre of the town. Fishing tourists are familiar with Kuldiga, thanks to the Venta River that flows at the edge of the city and has abundant fish population. Cultural tourists are also becoming increasingly interested in the town. Located on the island of Gotland, Visby is the most obviously medieval one out of the three towns. In addition to being a popular holiday destination for Swedes, Gotland is also often visited by international cruise ships. Visby is the busiest tourist town of the three, but in Visby, some tourism-related phenomena, such as the seasonality of services and number of holiday homes, are already visible as opposed to the two quieter partner towns. Visby was inscribed into UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1995.

In addition to their long town history and World Heritage status, Rauma, Kuldiga and Visby are connected by their relatively long distance to the country's capital and other major cities. On one hand, the distance poses a challenge to the towns; to be an attractive destination they must offer something unique. On the other hand, the towns are protected by distance: only the most interested tourists visit them, and these tourists are often willing to support sustainable practices.

Implementation Methods

Implementation methods are based on paradigm shift from consumable products to consumable processes. Activities are co-produced with local community and public actors around towns' public and private spaces.

Opening the doors of a private home to visitors in the form of home visits or home accommodation lets the visitors experience the everyday life of the town, for example heating a house using fireplaces or the constant need for maintenance of buildings. At an artist's studio, visitors can learn about how local cultural heritage has affected art and participate in community art projects. A medieval town is also a fixed archaeological relic and significant information about the town's past is recorded in the soil layers beneath the contemporary town. Construction works often require archaeological measures in order to document and study the archaeological heritage of the site. By opening the current archaeological excavations to visitors, either on-site or in social media, it is possible to introduce these hidden layers for a short moment before they are been covered again.

² "Resilience is the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. It is about how humans and nature can use shocks and disturbances like a financial crisis or climate change to spur renewal and innovative thinking."

What is resilience? Stockholm Resilience Centre. <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2015-02-19-what-is-resilience.html>

In order to produce activities around heritage conservation processes, partnerships between the private and public actors and co-creation³ of experiences are required. In this type of cooperation, the key action is sharing. Public actors are more focused on increasing knowledge and distributing it through research, education, interpretation and other supporting services among stakeholders and visitors. Private actors are focused on providing the scene – their home or business facilities – to other locals and visitors. Visitors wish to consume experiences. Joint task of all actors is to co-create experiences in these shared spaces, contributing to it with the skills, knowledge, communication or other capacity they possess, including funds. Buying these experiences, like home accommodation, is not considered as purchase but as contribution to World Heritage conservation.

First Results

The project, which began in September 2015 and will continue until November 2018, has passed its halfway. At this point, we can present some preliminary results.

In Old Rauma, home accommodation pilot projects have been very successful. Houses offering home accommodations have “house books” provided by the project. The books, which include information about the microhistory of the house based on several archive sources, have received extremely positive feedback. The guests also appreciate the personal guidance they get from their hosts and the chance to contribute to World Heritage by purchasing services from the locals. In addition to gaining some funds that can be used to restore the houses, the locals who are hosting guests feel that they gain interesting experiences. This activity has already been expanded to Kuldiga, where most of the locals are not yet used to work with visitors.

Restoration workshops in Latvia have brought together professionals from all around the Baltic Sea region. The ongoing restoration projects have sparked interest in visitors and locals alike, and the restoration sites have been popular attractions.

Archaeological heritage has been highlighted especially in social media. The Day of Archaeology event in Old Rauma in summer 2016 attracted more than 100 visitors to the excavations in a short period of time. In summer 2017 first results were introduced on an excavation site, which is now covered.

Communication has been particularly efficient in social media. This is an excellent channel for sharing tacit knowledge and crowdsourced information.

Discussion

Cultural environments like the towns of Visby, Rauma and Kuldiga need robust community to survive through centuries. The ownership of the estates is fragmented in all the participating towns and house owners have unequal financial possibilities to maintain their property. Newcomers may lack skills in dwelling a historic building. Local craftsmen are ageing, and the loss of skills necessary for conservation of buildings is under actual threat. Climate change brings new challenges to natural and cultural environments. Public funding for protected natural areas, listed buildings and other elements of cultural environments is more likely to reduce than increase when governments are tackling the various challenges of climate change⁴. The most effective way to conserve natural and cultural heritage and to tackle various future challenges is to empower the local community to act for heritage.

In environmental justice paradigm jointly developed shared future is a desirable objective to which everyone can contribute in shaping, making and co-creating it (Agyeman, Schlosberg, Craven & Matthews, 2016). This interpretation of environmental justice complies sustainable tourism; everyone can contribute to conservation of cultural and/or natural heritage.

³ Co-creation is the joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically (Galvano & Dallì, 2014; p. 644)

⁴ Nordic Council of Ministers: Nordic working papers; CERCMA Cultural Heritage as Resource

Uses of heritage in a historic town as a product for tourist attraction can lead to higher prices in real estate markets, rents and services in the area. It can erase commercial services of everyday use and alienate local stakeholders from their cultural heritage. Simultaneously it erases the most authentic part of a historic town, the human interaction with environment (Jokilehto, 2006).

Human interaction with the environment in a historic town is a trajectory through centuries, which has processed the cultural heritage we nurture, conserve and pass on to the future generations. Turning this heritage process into an attraction requires public-private partnership. Lessons learnt from adaptive comanagement of ecosystems and social-ecological systems can be useful when building these partnerships. These flexible community-based systems of resource management include various organizations and different levels of governance (Olsson, Folke, & Berkes, 2004).

Resilience is a valuable capital of a historic town. Resilience can be maintained and strengthened with just uses of environment and heritage possessed in it between local community and visitors. Sustainable tourism offers a good variety of tools for building resilience and safeguarding our shared heritage to future generations.

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