

Public space and tourism in post industrial territories

Lucila Urda Peña

Professor E.T.S.A.Madrid

lucilaurda@hotmail.com; lucila.urda@upm.es

The aim of this lecture is to analyze the impact of “cultural tourism” in historic cities, followed by some proposals to improve the quality of urban space in places heavily transformed by this industry. In general terms it is more usual to study and measure the environmental impact of activities related with tourism in protected natural areas or in the coast line. However, the social and physical impact in populated areas inside the urban fabric can be as deep as in the open landscape, though much more difficult to quantify. This phenomenon generally causes crowds invading the streets in the old city quarters, accompanied by new economic activities. As a result ordinary resident’s normal life is disrupted.

The threshold for this conflict may be found in the way two different ways of approaching the city, the ordinary citizen and the occasional visitor, struggle to coexist. Hardly a city, or a part of a city, can assume both kind of users and all the different activities and transformations demanded by each of them across the same urban fabric. When no agreement can be achieved between the two parts we are witnessing a saturated city.

Residents demand their own public space, a good mixture of uses, places to shop, work, walk and meet. Public demonstrations so frequent these days taking place in the city centre are only a reflection of the hassle its inhabitants live in. On the other hand, we define tourism as an industry based in an aggregate of different goods and services, resources and infrastructures organised and structured to make them available in the market to be used or consumed by tourists. Therefore, the closer and more organised these resources are located inside the urban space, the more successful the business can be.

This attitude has caused a deep transformation of old historic centres in many cities, usually not for the better. Streets, squares and buildings are transformed to the extent of becoming caricatures of themselves, as theme parks portraying what the tourist is supposed to be willing to see: a profusion of traditional decorations, handicrafts and antiquities, often a really kitsch picture.

As a consequence, when cities are transformed under the optics of tour operators they end up oversimplified. From a commercial point of view it seems more profitable to reduce the complexity of the city to a single idea or image, easy to assimilate and memorise by visitors. They leave the city carrying a satisfactory impression with them, believing they have captured the essence of a place and the ideas associated to it, in a comfortable short visit.

For this reason agents involved in tourist development usually concentrate on the clarification through the simplification of the urban stages, conveying the idea of a worthwhile visit. This effort eases the tourist experience, allowing the average visitor to understand what he sees.

This simplification of the complexity of the city is achieved many times by directing the visitors to one or several iconic spaces within the urban fabric. These places are designated as key to understand the essence of the city, the most important moments of its history, and somehow they must be able to explain the citizen’s identity.

However we know that cities are the sum of many different aspects difficult to synthesise. Most public spaces we admire as one single image inherited from the past are made through the superposition of different historic moments. Each period had a particular way of transforming the urban environment. Most of times, the results we contemplate today are difficult to analyse in an easy way within a short time, as generally demanded by mass tourism.

But there is a lot to learn, understand and reflect when visiting a city. Public space reflects the development of a community, of its history and its culture. Key factors as the traditional sources of income (trade, agriculture, military settlements...) during the history of the city, or the major religion professed by the population can give as a result very different urban schemes. As an example, mostly catholic or protestant areas translate their diverse ways of life to the design of public spaces: typical catholic fanfare contrasts with the austerity of Lutheran spaces.

On the other hand “pure spaces”, understood as those that were built in the past but barely transformed along the history, are very rare inside the city fabric. Most of the urban stages have been built and rebuilt several times along the centuries, even more if they kept a prominent role in the structure of the city or the society along different periods. Paradoxically, seeking of those “pure” or symbolic spaces is one of the main targets of mass tourism. These places are easy to recognise and identify with a period of history or an architectural style; they may be also large in scale and easy to reach. Powerful images published in booklets and guides precede the visit to the actual site so they become real icons of the travel experience. Places such as the Coliseum in Rome (Figure1), the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, the Ramblas in Barcelona (Figure 2) or the Sacre Coeur in Paris (Figure 3) are packed with tourists at any time.



Figure1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Very often this purity and simplification demanded by mass tourism is artificially recreated in order to attract visitors. In Spain we see how medium size cities with cultural interest have been heavily transformed to please potential guests. The old historic quarters have completely surrendered to their association with a single image, a particular gastronomy or the production of one unique object: Segovia is hopelessly linked with the taste of roasted piglet, Toledo with swords and armours, and Seville with horses or religious iconography. Even if none of the traditional icons associated with a city is fully attractive new ones can be created ex novo, as it happened in Bilbao. Souvenir businesses, craftsmen shops and typical restaurants across the areas of interest for the tourists reinforce these ideas, to the extent of transforming the cities into an exaggerated imitation of themselves.

The margins derived from this transformation are so big that even local authorities encourage these practices for what they see as an opportunity for greater economic profits and the development of their communities.

Following the previous examples, we see how a big percentage of the premises in Segovia's city centre are occupied by restaurants. They are usually busy during the weekends and keep closed during the rest of the days. This contrast ultimately generates dead spaces, uncomfortable for the ordinary residents.

In Toledo (Figure 4), due to the connection with the production of swords, armours and other typical objects, it is impossible to enjoy sightseeing without feeling the impression of being in a "luna park". Sets and objects placed here and there prevent from appreciating the surrounding architecture and the city itself.



Figure 4

A tour around Seville (Figure 5) on board of one of the traditional horse carriages may result a romantic image. Its anachronism is cause of delight for the average tourist.



Figure 5

Not to mention the straightforward link between Spain and paella, the most popular appreciation (often the only one) of the vast Spanish culinary culture. No one can deny paella can be extremely good, but good quality is not guaranteed in every single restaurant we find in every single city, even if they advertise so.

This is a bleak description of the most kitsch aspects of “cultural tourism”. The question now is if a change is possible in the way historic cities adapt to it, and what can they offer in the place of a faked and simplified image of themselves.

First of all, we must admit that there is a genuine interest about discovering other cultures and places that moves people to travel and visit distant cities. (3) A natural curiosity moves each individual traveller, and the experience of every trip should be as unique as every person is. The unexpected can derive from the possibility of meeting the real citizens and interact with the city, and it might be the essence of a new better way to enjoy sightseeing. On the other hand, we all have the experience of touring cities guided by local friends or relatives, who take us to special places out of the main tracks. The memories of such visits are drastically different from those we get visiting places we have no links with. A wish to find the “authentic” when travelling should move the visitor to meet first hand the way contemporary life develops and adapts to historic quarters.

This potential can be the starting point toward a new attitude. The challenge is to make a wider and more honest approach to each city and its history, its monuments and cultural facts, but also to the way all that coexists with modern life. Tourism should be supported by the will to understand the collective memory of the inhabitants of a city, the ways they express their worries and thoughts. This is not possible without the involvement of both public institutions and tourist operators. In this respect, local policies and private initiatives have an opportunity to upgrade their targets by using more permanent cultural values for our territories. Public space as the support for touristic activities can also be the place where citizens live and express themselves. Furthermore, it must be made clear that the history of a city is not only reflected in the

monuments built from the antiquity to the 19th century, but the transformations it overcomes to present day. An important chapter of the history of western cities takes place precisely during the 20th century, when many historic city centres were deeply altered.

However, what do we talk about when we talk about public space? In many cases public space has been privatized and private space make itself visible by advertising. It would be useful to avoid the devalued concept of public and to consider the potential of democratic spaces.

The cultural tourist should ideally be interested in the same degree in the past and in the present of the city that visits. This would allow visitors to understand the catharsis that occurs between the historic city and its current problems.

In this respect, one might ask: what are the actual objectives of the cultural tourist? Are they so narrow because of a lack of information or simply because of lack of interest? Today the access to information is wider than ever but one might also ask: to what kind of information? The majority of tourist information on the internet is scarce and, in some cases, not very accurate. Tourist information is more a way of advertising than a source of information about cultural facts and, since then, the economic factor is essential for the election of one or another tourist destination. When we enquire to plan a cultural visit we get mostly skewed or filtered information. We are rarely encouraged to choose between different options to avoid crowds, maybe by pointing less accessible places and providing wider cultural references.

Obviously deals from 30 euros at hotel all inclusive do not offer high-quality tourist experiences, considering the variety of services that the tourist demands, from transportation to staff and food. So when we talk about improving the quality of the experience of potential visitors we must talk about improving the whole experience of traveling.

Cities organized to welcome mass tourism become mere scenarios where objects of all kind are on show with the sole purpose of selling, dressed up with cultural aspirations. But, what would happen if we transform the consumerist target into a cultural target? Can visitors bring something back home than a mere souvenir? Probably, the best memory of a trip is a good collection of experiences we would have never found without leaving our comfortable armchair. This is the essence of traveling for pleasure after all.

Visitors can learn about a country's history, society and politics visiting museums or emblematic public buildings. They will give a "static" view of what a city, country or region is. To be aware of the dynamics of modern life, to learn how the official culture reflects in people's ordinary existence, a tourist needs to walk the streets and loose himself in the real life of the city. Then, there is a chance for the unexpected. What would happen if art was the motor of a transformation of public space? What if art transcends the walls of the museums and invades the streets? The cutting edge, radical expression of modernity, can have room in public spaces, weather through the official initiative or in a more spontaneous expression. Traditionally art emerged as a result of the artists' reflection on their own society and time. Very often art works, commissioned by those who wanted put their names in the city's history, invaded public spaces, giving them a sense and transforming the perception of local and visitors for centuries. Image, light, textures and even sounds could be molded to fill up with content an open urban space. Under the same light, contemporary art can add value to existing public spaces.

We have exposed how public spaces in historical cities degenerate when they are overexposed to the action of tourist industry. Combining art and public space away from the more conventional tracks can be applied to old city centers as a possibility to improve the tourist experience.

The regeneration of public space could be done by two different actions: the physical transformation or the inclusion of ephemeral interventions.

The ephemeral is related with search of surprises that tourists might be looking for.

Nowadays in many cases art comes out from the museums and conquers public space. Streets and squares can be transformed with the presence of art works and public space could be invaded with social demonstrations. (Figure 6) The inclusion of temporary art in public spaces provides a rich scenario that can be also very attractive for the tourist. (Figure 7)

Reading the city and the artistic interventions (spontaneous or deliberate) a traveler can enjoy while walking along the streets is a way of knowing its history and a useful way to deeply understand the collective memory.

The wandering as an aesthetic practice is a way to generate landscapes. This way to know the city is possible through the ephemeral actions that change the public space every now and then because of public art works and public demonstrations.

There are anthropological, philosophical and artistic works that lead us to drift as common place.

There are many examples that show how temporary interventions in public places make people participate in the physical space of the city. Institutional or spontaneous actions transform the historic spaces into dynamic scenes of the cities.

Both the inclusion of art ephemera as a response to a critic situation or the development of small graffiti or drawings, public art expressions can explain to visitors the feelings of locals toward their own circumstances. The inclusion of ephemeral performances in public spaces out of the usual tourist circuit may mean a novelty for the urbanite tourist and also promote a new different approach to the traveling experience. In addition art interventions speak about current reflections that have to do with the urban space and its relationship with the existing problems. Urban centers could be transformed from a commercial context towards a more sophisticated and up-to-date understanding of public spaces.

The pursue of a catharsis between people and city should be a priority for institutions, urban planners, artists and society in general. Tourism can be enriched with more permanent values of the territories.



Figure 6



Figure 7



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