

Developing creativity in tourist experiences: A solution to the serial reproduction of culture?

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Abstract

As culture is increasingly utilised as a means of social and economic development, the cultural tourism market is being flooded with new attractions, cultural routes and heritage centres. However, many consumers, tired of encountering the serial reproduction of culture in different destinations are searching for alternatives. The rise of skilled consumption, the importance of identity formation and the acquisition of cultural capital in (post)modern society point towards the use of creativity as an alternative to conventional cultural tourism. This paper considers the development of creative spaces, creative spectacles and creative tourism from the perspective of supply and demand. The need for creativity in developing new products and how to address the challenge of serial reproduction are discussed, and examples of creative tourism projects are examined and contrasted to traditional models of cultural tourism.

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1. Introduction

According to many commentators (e.g. Ritzer, 1999; Urry, 2001) culture has now become an essential element of the tourism system or ‘culture of tourism’. Cultural tourism is also frequently quoted as being one of the largest and fastest growing segments of global tourism (e.g. WTO, 2004). Tourism and culture both play an important role in image creation processes, providing a major rationale for the aestheticisation of landscapes (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998), as well as in shaping the environment to meet the needs of consumers. Indeed, the growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it has fuelled the ‘symbolic economy’ of cities and

regions (Ray, 1998; Zukin, 1995). The image of a city or region becomes based both on physical assets, and a series of experiences built around those assets, generally extending to the ‘living culture’ and the atmosphere of places (Wilson, 2002).

Culture has become a basic resource from which the themes and narratives essential to ‘placemaking’ can be derived (Gottdiener, 1997), often seen as tying the physical assets and the living culture together. It has also been argued that culture *is* the source of urban attraction (Fainstein, Hoffman, & Judd, 2003). Many declining cities, for example, have had to create new narratives of regeneration based on urban culture and heritage, as well as making a transition towards an economy of signs and symbols (Lash & Urry, 1994) and the representations of space positioned by Soja (1996, p. 79) as ‘secondspace’. Many rural areas have re-defined themselves as consumption spaces in which history and rural tradition take over from modern agricultural

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production as the key elements of identification (Cloke, 1993). However, as more cities and regions compete in (re)producing and promoting themselves for tourism and culture employing the same formulaic mechanisms, their ability to create ‘uniqueness’ arguably diminishes, often assumed to lead towards the ‘serial reproduction’ of culture (Harvey, 1989), ‘placelessness’ (Relph, 1976), non-places (Augé, 1995) or McDonaldisation (Ritzer & Liska, 1997). Similarly, Rojek, (1995) observes the growth of ‘universal cultural space’ that ‘provides the same aesthetic and spatial references wherever one is in the world’ (1995, p. 146).

Ironically, the strategies adopted by cities to avoid such serial reproduction and create a ‘distinctive’ image are also converging. In a study of the use of culture in the image-creation of Dutch local Authorities, Cachet, Kroes Willems, and Richards (2003) found that a large number of cities fell back on stereotypical pictorial images, and that many had even adopted the same promotional slogans. Zukin argues that ‘*so-called “cultural cities” each claim distinctiveness but reproduce the same facilities in any number of places, echoing industrial globalisation with its geographically widespread production but concentrated consumption*’ (2004, p. 8). This is especially evident in the case of the Guggenheim Museum, where the attempt by Bilbao to establish cultural distinction by ‘buying’ a Guggenheim museum has already been undermined by the recent proliferation of Guggenheims across the world. New Guggenheims have opened in Las Vegas and Berlin, with others under discussion in Salzburg, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo and Edinburgh. The waiting list of cities for a Guggenheim ‘kit’ has now reached 60 (Richards, 2000), so perhaps ‘McGuggenheim’ (Honigsbaum, 2001; Ibelings, 2001) is now a more appropriate label for this ‘museum chain’?

This paper examines some of the consequences of increasing serial reproduction of culture for tourism, and suggests that the reorientation of current models of ‘cultural tourism’ towards new modes of creativity-led tourism may represent one response to this problem.

2. Urban and regional cultural strategies and tourism

According to Amin and Thrift (2002) and Pine and Gilmore (1999), increasing competition in the market means that ‘goods and services are no longer enough’ and that producers must differentiate their products by transforming them into ‘experiences’ which engage the consumer. The same process is arguably affecting cities and regions worldwide, as they brand themselves into experiences for residents and visitors alike (Richards, 2001). Much of the experience creation that is happening at present is driven by a desire of public authorities to develop the productive resources of their regions, particularly as traditional sources of income decline.

The production of culture has therefore become central to many development strategies worldwide (Lim, 1993; McCann, 2002). As Selfa Clemente (2003, pp. 251–252) remarks in the case of Barcelona:

In recent years, the term culture has appeared recurrently in urban transformation processes... Different conceptualisations of culture have been developed to promote a new model and mode of regulation in accordance with a project of inserting the city into international flows of capital (*our translation*).

The attempt by policy makers to ‘(re)valorise place through its cultural identity’ in the face of increasing globalisation and economic integration is defined by Ray (1998, p. 3) as the ‘culture economy’ approach to development. The idea of a culture economy stems from three sources: the changing nature of post-industrial, consumer capitalism; economic development policies and the growth of regionalism as a global phenomenon. Culture has become a crucial resource in the post-industrial economy, as reflected in the use of cultural heritage in the development strategies of the European Union and other bodies. Culture is increasingly used by cities and regions as a means of preserving their cultural identity and developing their ‘socio-economic vibrancy’ (Ray, 1998, p. 5).

In developing their ‘real cultural capital’, cities and regions often mirror the efforts of entrepreneurs to capitalise on the intellectual property associated with their products—except that the intellectual property, or cultural capital, is generally tied up in a particular location, effectively acting as a counterweight to the footloose existence of financial capital. However, attempts to develop local knowledge as a form of ‘intellectual property’ and cultural competitive advantage are threatened by the tendency for such local knowledge to become incorporated into global systems of value creation. The development of major cultural brands is a good example of this (see Evans, 2003). The production of brands such as Guggenheim or the European City of Culture event has the advantage of consumer familiarity, but by becoming a brand these cultural icons tend to lose their distinctiveness.

Facing the perceived threat of locally distinctive products becoming ‘commoditised’ and indistinct, cities and regions have begun to adopt a series of strategies aimed at creating a distinctive place image or experience in an increasingly crowded global marketplace. Many of these strategies involve tourism in some form, since the shift from production to consumption-based urban growth forces cities to attract mobile consumers as a source of income and jobs (Richards, 2001).

Strategies adopted by cities and regions in developing distinction in tourism can arguably be categorised under a few major headings.

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