Tourist use of historic cities: Review of international agreements and literature

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Abstract

The article proposes an overview of different approaches focused on achieving a balance between preservation of heritage resources and promotion of tourist activities in historic cities. A selection of international agreements, either heritage-related or tourism-related, has been made. Furthermore, a review of the current international literature on the topic has been developed, focusing both on theoretical approaches and on specific proposals. Considering social and cultural aspirations of the local community are crucial aspects to develop a more balanced distribution of the costs and benefits of tourism in historic cities. Efforts should be made to create facilities focusing on residents needs rather than on spectacular effects. Moreover, a mix of uses and the maintenance of local businesses should be encouraged. The commitment to a more sustainable model can be helpful to target potential visitors aware of social and environmental issues, many of which are specially attracted to the liveliness and authenticity of the place.

Key words: *Sustainability, cultural tourism, urban heritage, historic city.*

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Introduction

In recent decades many cities have linked the development of urban cultural tourism strategies with urban regeneration. This decision has both positive and negative impacts. On one hand, tourism can contribute to the funding of heritage conservation, the maintenance of urban services and the creation of new facilities and events. On the other hand, it has a positive impact on the image of the city to residents and potential investors. However, the benefits for the city decrease with increasing dependence on tourism.

One of the main negative effects of tourism in the city is the need for constant public investment in infrastructure, attractions, planning and promotion to keep competitiveness. Public investment is sometimes focused on facilities which are not necessary for residents. Moreover, visitors' concentration leads to the overuse of cultural assets and monofunctionality. Finally, tourism can lead to museification and trivialization of the local culture.

The impact of tourism in the historic city has been treated extensively in the international literature, especially in relation to the fragility of heritage and the opportunities that economic benefits can bring to conservation. There is a wide coverage of particular examples tackling tensions between tourist use and heritage preservation and it is time to add to the discussion a review of the most significant contributions on the topic made by international charters and agreements.

The international charters approach to sustainable tourism in historic cities

The United Nations Conference on International Travel and Tourism (1963) outlines the relationship between heritage and tourism through the acknowledgement of the power of conservation policies as an investment tool in development projects. Cultural tourism is specially valued thanks to its economic multiplier effect.

Until the 1970s, international charters did not make any references about the damages caused by the overuse of cultural assets. The Charter on Cultural Tourism (ICOMOS, 1976) states that preserving cultural and natural heritage should prevail over all other considerations, independently of any other social, political or economic reason. To achieve it, the Charter proposes to limit land uses and prevent the creation of tourist

facilities or services that are against the primary concern of protecting existing cultural heritage.

Other agreements of the 1980s and 1990s were focused on offering a responsible interpretation of the local culture and avoiding exceeding the tolerance levels of the host community and the environment. Among them, the Acapulco Document (World Tourism Organization, 1982) is especially relevant since it first affirms the principle of authenticity to fight deformation and falsification of heritage. Emphasis is put on reinforcing relationships of mutual respect between visitors and residents.

Soon after, the Tourism Bill of Rights and Tourist Code (World Tourism Organization, 1985) emphasizes the need for a proper dissemination of information to tourists, which should aim to preserve the artistic, archaeological and cultural assets.

The Hague Declaration on Tourism (World Tourism Organization, 1989) highlights the need to take into account the carrying capacity of tourism of the local culture. The integrity of the cultural and human environment is essential for the development of tourism, and a rational management can contribute significantly to the protection of cultural heritage and to increase the quality of life of residents.

Subsequently, the Charter for Sustainable Tourism (1995) states that tourism is an ambivalent activity, which can bring great advantages in the socioeconomic and cultural level, while contributing to the loss of local identity. As a result, it must be addressed from a global perspective including the principles of sustainability.

The Zacatecas Declaration (1998) main achievement was to affirm that tourism and leisure activities should make a contribution to the protection, maintenance and improvement of the urban environment. To achieve this goal it is necessary to retain a portion of the financial resources generated by tourism businesses and related activities in the community.

The Samarkand Declaration (World Tourism Organization and UNESCO, 1994) emphasizes the importance of tourism as an integral part of the culture, and the value of culture as a tourist resource. After it, the Khiva Declaration on Tourism and the

Preservation of the Cultural Heritage (World Tourism Organization and UNESCO, 1999) confirms the close relationship between culture and tourism and the importance of these two fields to build a culture of peace and an opportunity for mutual exchange and understanding. To measure the tourist pressure on built heritage and fight trivialization, standardization and excessive commercial treatment of heritage assets is suggested.

The International Cultural Tourism Charter (ICOMOS, 1999) considers that tourism can be an important factor for stimulating growth when properly managed, but it can also threaten the integrity of built heritage and its singularity. The Charter demands cooperation between political representatives, public and private bodies, host communities and tourism stakeholders to develop sustainable plans involving increased protection of heritage resources. In addition, the Charter highlights the importance of preserving authenticity and variety of heritage assets. It states that plans must set limits to impacts derived by high visitor numbers on heritage assets, transports and the social, economic and cultural well-being of the host community. Furthermore, the Charter considers that tourism promotion plans should provide responsible information to potential visitors about the specific culture and heritage features of the place. It argues that the promotion, distribution and sale of souvenirs and other products should include a social and economic return to the host community, while ensuring that their cultural integrity is not harmed.

At the end of the century, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (World Tourism Organization, 1999) states that tourism policies and activities should be carried out with respect for the artistic, archaeological and cultural heritage. It pays particular attention to protection and restoration of monuments, shrines and museums, with the aim of opening these places to tourist visits. In addition, the Code intends to promote public access to privately owned monuments and religious buildings.

In the 21st century, international agreements have gone further with the statements established in the previous decades. The Ename Charter (ICOMOS, 2008) insists in the need of public access to cultural sites and a presentation of heritage that is socially and scientifically accepted. Finally, the Hanoi Declaration (UNESCO, 2009) is innovative

since it highlights both the importance and fragility of historic urban landscapes, which were given priority by UNESCO ten years ago.

Proposals developed by authors and organizations to achieve a better balance between costs and benefits of tourism in historic cities

Several authors and studies have focused on how to achieve a tourist model that considers costs and benefits and ensures the preservation of cultural resources, since these assets determine the attractiveness of tourist destinations.

According to Pérez Cano (2001), sustainable tourism is the one that gets a balance between a constant demand and an environment of high quality, which includes heritage preservation. Planning a sustainable tourist model involves a rational use of cultural resources, so that the negative impacts can be corrected without leaving a permanent mark. It is needed to create tourist products having sufficient market acceptance to sustain a steady flow of visitors and maintain long-term economic viability through their constant adaptation. (Pérez Cano, n.d.)

Meanwhile, Jansen-Verbeke & Lievois (2001) indicate that a sustainable tourist model should begin by recognizing the irreversibility of the process of adaptation of the historic tourist city. Measures should be taken to achieve a balanced tourist development ensuring the social and cultural aspirations of the community, the dissemination of economic benefits, a greater understanding of citizen perceptions of the tourist activity and the integration of particular assets in the wider urban management policy.

The World Tourism Organization and the European Commission (2005) have also entered the debate on the sustainability of urban cultural tourism. Both institutions conclude that there should be a limit to the potential growth of visitor numbers, a conclusion also reached by Van der Borg, Costa & Gotti (1996) after analyzing the problems of some of the most visited European heritage cities. Some of the measures proposed to mitigate the negative impacts are controlling traffic and parking, raising the price of some overcrowded attractions, promoting alternative attractions that are not located in the city centre or encouraging visits in medium or low season. Further proposals tend to attract visitors who stay overnight because of their higher expenditure.

Both institutions are also committed to developing cultural products inspired by existing cultural values that are distinctive and rooted in the community.

The study of the carrying capacity is useful to mitigate the negative impacts that a high number of tourists has on urban heritage but it is difficult to establish thresholds, since acceptable limits depend on the circumstances of each city (García Hernández, 2003). Troitiño Vinuesa (2003) defines four dimensions that must be managed in a combined and complementary way: the physical carrying capacity that sets the limit after which cultural resources are adversely affected, the economic carrying capacity that sets the limit for functional balances, the social carrying capacity when residents perceive tourism as invasion and cultural integration carrying capacity when local culture is trivialized and the identity is lost. Some of the proposed measures are to activate underused assets, making the city welcoming for residents and visitors, encouraging multifunctional, maintaining symbolic townscapes and building effective bridges between urban planning, tourism and cultural heritage policies.

With respect to the relationship between tourism and culture, the Agenda 21 of Culture (2004) emphasizes that tourist systems should be respectful towards cultures and customs of the visited localities. Van der Borg & Russo (2005) also cite the preservation of cultural identity as a prerequisite for the sustainability of tourism in the historic city, along with the spatial balance of uses.

Among the recommendations of the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport (c2000) in urban regeneration, it is a priority to conduct extensive and ongoing consultation with the local community before plans are finalized and it is also important to focus more on community actions rather than on iconic buildings. Nyseth & Sognnaes (2013) also estimate that the most successful regeneration operations are those that provide a strong collaboration with the local community. Jones & Evans (2012) consider that in order to be successful, regeneration must respect affective links between the community and urban spaces. Lombardi, Porter, Barber & Rogers (2011) add that emphasis should be on equity, reflected in the maintenance of local businesses, the use of the accumulated knowledge of the neighborhood and the creation of inclusive spaces.

The British Department concludes that iconic buildings are no longer needed because more modest projects perform better and are more useful to communities. Doucet, Van Kempen & Van Weesep (2010) estimate that such projects should be accompanied by the objective of reducing barriers in the city instead of creating new ones. Doucet (2013) also believes that iconic projects should not be created without making an effort to improve the mix of uses, social groups, types of housing, facilities and jobs.

To avoid gentrification, the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport is committed to the mix of uses and housing types, including affordable housing. It is also important to support local businesses and spread regeneration efforts between neighborhoods so that the concentration of investments does not produce massive displacement. In order to encourage local businesses it is proposes to encourage consumption of local products, promote locally owned businesses and improve their competitiveness.

In order to make tourism a truly contributor to regeneration without expelling uses and residents, Huning & Novy (2006) on one hand, and Aquino, Phillips & Sung (2012) on the other, consider that it is necessary to give priority to the interests of local people and businesses, incorporating their views on the broad body of policies related to the tourist use of the city. The demand for a greater involvement of the local community in the definition of tourism policies at the local level is part of the British national strategies since 1991.

Several measures have been proposed to achieve a better distribution between costs and benefits, one of which is to communicate among the local population and businesses not only the advantages but also the disadvantages of tourism. Furthermore, it is important to consult periodically residents about their opinion on tourism. Steps are being taken to achieve that residents can enjoy tourist services and events at affordable prices. Setting fees for visitors who do not overnight is a measure to achieve a better contribution to the maintenance of services (Week, 2012).

The commitment to a more sustainable tourism in the historic city can be competitive to attract a growing market segment in developed countries, characterized by greater social and environmental awareness, what leads potential visitors to look for "authentic" travel

experiences (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2008). These tourists even demand that the services and products they consume meet ethical codes of production and marketing beyond the price component. In addition, this type of visitors participate in a variety of tourism experiences that favor the development of this activist attitude towards certain causes and convictions (Law, 1996).

Conclusions

After having analyzed what international agreements and selected authors have stated about conflicts between heritage preservation and tourist use of the historic city, a significant gap arises between experience at a local level and its translation to institutional commitments. International charters give clues to solve conflicts in the long term but they are not useful enough to tackle current tensions, specially taking into account that they only started to acknowledge potential damages caused by tourism since the 1970s.

Measures to rebalance damages and benefits such as carrying capacity analysis and Agenda 21 have been delivered in a number of cases but they have arrived late to international cultural entities agendas. A similar situation happened to falsification and authenticity, which are now at the centre of international discussion. Other aspects have not been deeply treated yet in international charters even though they are widely recognized as having negative impacts on the local culture. This is the case of focusing tourist strategies on iconic projects and the relationship between tourist overuse and gentrification.

From what has been analyzed, it is possible to conclude that considering social and cultural aspirations of the local community and promoting a tourist model respecting its identity are two of the most important aspects to be taken into account to achieve a more balanced distribution of the benefits of urban cultural tourism and reduce its negative consequences. To deliver this objective it is needed to encourage a stronger participation in the definition of tourism policies, to explain both benefits and negative effects of tourism to the local population and to study the carrying capacity. However, the difficulties to establish detailed limits in urban areas must be considered.

In relation to urban regeneration, the literature review has shown that in order to achieve a more sustainable model efforts should be concentrated on creating facilitations that meet residents' needs instead of focusing on marketing effects. In addition, a mix of uses and the maintenance of local businesses and activities should be given more attention to avoid standardization and expulsion of commercial activities deeply linked to the city's living character.

Finally, the positive impacts that achieving a more sustainable model can have for the local tourist industry need further attention, particularly in relation to potential tourists who are aware of social and environmental issues and who are willing to find lively and authentic places.

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