

Meaning of place and the tourist experience

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Abstract

When visiting a place, people sometimes experience something which goes beyond physical or sensory properties. This is often referred to as 'sense of place' or 'genius loci'. In urban design literature, sense of place is often attributed to three elements namely physical setting, activity and meaning. This presentation will consider one element, namely meaning, and examine the extent to which meaning of place impinges on the tourist experience.

Buildings and urban spaces communicate meaning. Meanings are partly the result of codification based on a system of pre-determined meanings and partly are acquired over time as people give to space historical associations derived from events. The meaning of buildings, spaces and artefacts are subjective and can be read and interpreted differently by different people in accordance to their background and culture.

Narrative is one of several ways how the tourist can derive meaning from the experience. By means of narratives, tourists are able to visualise past events, a process reinforced by heritage sites which enable tourists to see, and even touch, tangible evidence. This makes the narrative more real and thus the tourist experience more interesting and enjoyable. The narratives may be about the people of the place and therefore they provide an insight to the national identity of the country or region. Different typologies of tourists can be identified including those whose primary motivation for the tourism activity is a search for meaning. To illustrate the relation between tourism experience and meaning, I refer to my doctorate research on the tourist experience in Valletta.

1. Introduction

When visiting a new place, people sometimes experience something which goes beyond the physical or sensory properties of a place. This is often referred to as "sense of place", or using more urban design jargon "genius loci". Montgomery (1998: 94) notes that *"It is a relatively easy task to think of a successful place, But it is much more difficult to know why a place is successful."* Different authors give different, albeit similar, understandings of place or sense of place. Castello (2010:2) notes that people feel better in spaces which are felt to contain certain qualities. The perception develops from a range of environmental stimuli relating to the objective and material nature of the space. In perception, vision is the sense which provides most information. Perceiving space as 'place' is not just about environmental stimuli. Smaldone et al

(2005:400) notes that place is not a constant in all circumstances and that it has “*a range of subtleties and significances as great as the range of human experiences and intentions.*” Berleant (2003:51) argues that ‘place’ is neither a physical location nor a state of mind. He describes it as “*the engagement of the conscious body with the conditions of a specific location.*” Norberg-Schulz (1980) describes ‘genius loci’ or sense of place as representing the sense people have of a place, understood as the sum of all physical as well as symbolic values. According to Jiven and Larkham (2003: 78,79), it is people, individuals and society, that integrate built form, topography and natural conditions, through their value systems, to form a sense of place.

Urban design literature often refers to a model to explain sense of place. Relph (1976:47) refers to physical setting, activities and meanings as the “*three basic elements of the identity of places*”. Explanations and/or slight variants to this model are put forward by Canter (1977), Punter (1991), Montgomery (1998), Gustafson (2001) and Carmona et al (2010). These three components are deemed to be interrelated and inseparably interwoven in experience (Relph, 1976). Montgomery (1998:95) argues there are many physical elements which can be combined with each other and with ‘the psychology of place’ to produce urban quality, involving architectural form, scale, landmarks, vistas, meeting places, open space, greenery and so on. He argues however that for urban quality, the social, psychological and cultural dimensions of place may be more relevant. Similarly, Carmona et al (2010:120) note that the significance of the physicality of places is often overstated and argue that activities and meaning may be as, or more important, in creating a sense of place. Relph (1976: 48) notes that whereas physical setting and activities can probably be easily appreciated, meaning is more difficult to grasp.

This paper considers in detail one of the three elements which constitute sense of place namely meaning. Research carried out for Valletta (Ebejer, 2015) is used to broaden the discussion and relate it to feedback received from tourists of their experience of Valletta.

2 How buildings and spaces acquire meaning

Architecture communicates meaning (Eco, 1973; Cuthbert 2006). For example, the cathedral is the focal point of the medieval European city and dominates the town. This indicates the importance of religion in urban life in medieval times (Mazumdar et al, 2004:386). Strike (1994: 25) notes that architecture can be read in different ways depending on the type of construction, the structural system, the details and the materials used. He describes how a building can be a symbol of a specific place (for example the Eiffel Tower is a symbol of Paris). Moreover, different architectural features have different symbolic meanings (for example, a spire suggests that the building is a church, a crenellated parapet evokes the idea of a castle). The architectural symbol can also indicate an abstract idea or emotion (for example a portcullis is a symbol of strength and defence).

The communication of architecture is dependent on a process of codification whereby people understand messages on the basis of pre-determined meanings (Eco, 1973:62,63). Cuthbert (2006:66) notes that our cultural environment, including building and spaces, constitutes a system of meanings structured around a complex amalgam of codes.

According to Grauman (2002:96)

“Members of a culture group invest places and people with meaning and significance. Not individuals but people agree on what is a forest or a jungle, what is downtown and what is suburb. It is essentially the language that people, that is the members of a language or cultural community, share (with, of course, individual, sometimes idiosyncratic, variations) that communicates meaning.”

The acquisition of meaning of building and spaces takes on a particular significance with reference to historic areas. Meaning is intrinsic to historic areas - it is the history of the place which is the meaning and which in turn could be a source for other meanings which the visitor will derive based on one's background. Place acquires its distinctive meaning through the interaction of human sensibility and the material environment

(Berleant, 2003:43; Staiff, 2012:42). For Sancar and Severcan (2010:295), the meanings ascribed to specific environments are products of interactive processes involving the individual, the setting and the broader social world. Urban context often becomes a repository of social and cultural significance, as well as the embodiment of a collective memory (Berleant, 2003:49). Gospodini (2001: 929) refers to historic urban cores as fragments of the city that have become rich in meaning and that are subject to different interpretations depending on the contexts.

The meaning of buildings, spaces and artefacts are created through the person-object interactions that are heavily influenced by the tourist's own cultural and social background (Wearing and Wearing, 1996; Tweed and Sutherland, 2007:65). The heritage experience entails coding systems which are not stable nor are they universal. It can be compared to a language for which each individual possesses their own personal dictionary which is constantly changing (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996: 15). For heritage artefacts, the visitor often manipulates the artefact on offer, bringing one's own emotional and intellectual responses. This results in meanings which may or may not have been previously conceived (Staiff, 2012:45).

Meanings are dependent on the events and artefacts which the buildings and spaces are seen as representing. Visitors produce *"their own subjective experiences through their imaginations and emotions"* and *"imbue objects in the setting provided with their own personal meanings"* (McIntosh, 1999: 57). It is meaningful social experiences, rather than simply the spatial attributes of physical settings, that drive attachment to places (Sancar and Severcan (2010:296). Timothy (1997: 752) notes different levels of meaning depending on the extent of personal attachment including personal, local, national and world. There are instances where an artefact, viewed as world or national heritage by one person, is considered as personal by another. In considering meaning of place it is useful to distinguish between people who are very familiar with a place (i.e. residents or regular visitors) and those who are much less familiar (i.e. tourists). The way the place will be read and interpreted will be different between these two groups of people.

3 Tourist experience and the search for meaning

The search for meaning is of central importance to people so much so that Frankl (1992: 105) describes it as the primary motivation in a person's life. One should, therefore, not underestimate the relevance of meaning of urban spaces and built heritage when discussing the tourist experience. Leisure is not just a search for pleasure but also a search for meaning (Ragheb, 1996: 249). Hannabus (1999: 299) argues that tourists do not just search for what is different from their everyday lives but are *"also in search of 'meaning', of the 'genuine' or 'authentic' holiday."*

Cohen (1979) develops a typology of tourist experiences and distinguishes between five modes of tourist experiences. He presents them in an ascending order from the most 'superficial' motivated by 'pleasure' to one most 'profound' motivated by the search for meaning. Cohen recognises that the tourist may experience different modes on a single trip but presents them separately for analytic purposes. Broadly speaking, the five modes can be categorised into two; those for which the site does not involve meaning (namely 'recreational' and 'diversionary') and those for which meaning has a pivotal role in the tourist's experience (namely 'experiential', 'experimental' and 'existential').

In the 'recreational' mode, the trip restores the tourists' *"physical and mental powers and endows him with a general sense of well-being."* Although the experience may be interesting for the tourist, it will not be personally significant. The 'diversionary' mode is *"a mere escape from the boredom and meaninglessness of routine, everyday existence, into the forgetfulness of a vacation."*

For Cohen, the 'experiential' mode involves the quest for meaning outside the confines of one's own society. It is to some degree, spurred by alienation and a sense of lack of authenticity at home. Cohen draws comparisons between 'experiential' mode and a religious pilgrimage in that both involve a search for what is perceived to be authentic. In tourism however, the authenticity will not provide a new meaning and guidance, even if it may reassure and uplift the tourist. 'Experimental' mode involves an effort to rediscover oneself in another context because of the alienation which deeply affects the

individual. 'Existential' mode involves the search for a better world elsewhere resulting from a feeling of living in the wrong place and at the wrong time (Lengkeek, 2001).

Cohen's five modes can be categorised into two broad categories: those that involve meaning and those that do not. This is also reflected in McIntosh's (1999:44) distinction between 'mindful' and 'mindless' state of mind in relation to the heritage visitor experience. 'Mindful' refers to visitors being "*sensitive to the context, actively processing information and questioning what is going on in a setting,*" resulting in greater appreciation and understanding of the heritage and its meaning. In contrast, little or no understanding will result from a 'mindless' tourism experience and the visitor will not take note of the meaning that may reside within the site or feature being visited.

4 The role of the past in the tourist experience

My doctorate research on Valletta (Ebejer, 2015) suggests that the City's past is made apparent in various ways; the most evident is in the buildings and the fortifications. The appearance, form, detail and material of most buildings show that these were built many years ago and that therefore they have a story to tell. Another way in which the past is made known is through the narratives which are communicated by tour guides or by means of guide books, information panels and internet. A further way how the past is communicated is by means of certain practices which indicate aspects of a way of life which have persisted to today. Examples include religious ceremony and the parish feast.

The tourist experience of Valletta is mostly about how the tourist relates to its past. Because of the extent and the way that history is ever-present in Valletta, it is inevitable that history plays a prominent role in the tourists' experience. The relationship between the tourist and Valletta's past manifests itself in a number of different, albeit interrelated, ways.

Being in a historic context

Several interviewees liked Valletta because it has so much history and so many old buildings. They enjoyed being immersed in a historic context. They knew very little about the history of the place but they could tell that Valletta is full of history and it is something that they liked and enjoyed.

Going back in time

The architecture clearly indicates that Valletta's buildings were built many years ago. In most streets and spaces of Valletta there are no buildings or structures which are evidently recent. Several interviewees remarked that it is evident from walking around that the place has so much history, to the extent that some thought it has been kept exactly as it was. The feeling that one gets, therefore, is that of being taken back in time. In spaces where there are no evident modern features, the tourist experience is not just about being in a different place but also possibly the feeling of being in a different time.

The feeling of being in a different time is further reinforced in spaces where there are no cars, like for example in Valletta's stepped streets and in the pedestrian areas.

Visualising the past

There were several instances where the interviewee tried to imagine or visualise how it was in the past. In a sense, this is also about the feeling of being taken back in time.

5 Narratives in the creation of place

Another parallel that can be drawn is between the 'meaning' component of sense of place and narratives. The social identity of people is constructed and sustained by means of webs of stories and narratives produced by people (Rickly Boyd, 2009: 262).

According to Jamal and Hollinshead (2001:73); *“There are no stories waiting to be told and no certain truths waiting to be recorded; there are only stories yet to be constructed.”* Narratives are ‘constructed’ by people and they may, or may not, be based on historical fact. More importantly, heritage narratives are stories that people tell about themselves, about others and about the past.

A narrative is better appreciated by tourists if there is a heritage site which, as Rickly Boyd (2009: 262) describes it, provides *“the material and the setting to combine lived experience with myth in the production of a uniquely personal tourist narrative.”* Narrative may further support and reinforce the tourist’s experience of place. This is all the more evident in heritage sites where stories reinforce a place uniqueness or focuses on narratives of national significance (Chronis, 2012:445). A successful tourism product is an interpretation of the local history or narrative within the context of the historical experience of the tourist or visitor (Rickly Boyd, 2009: 262). Many tourism experiences are dependent on the availability and communication of narratives. Some places are part of the tourism itinerary because they are associated with powerful stories (Chronis, 2012: 444).

For some tourists, part of the experience involves understanding ‘how life really was’. Life conditions that might be unthinkable in the present day can be ‘experienced’, or more fully understood and appreciated, through the narrative (Chronis 2012: 451).

Narratives of the past

Several interviewees referred to history as an important aspect of Valletta. People see buildings and structures which are evidently of the past and they are interested in the narrative behind them. In their comments, they refer to different times of Valletta’s history and often seek to get more information on the narrative from guidebooks and other sources. For some, getting to know about the narrative is what the tourism experience is all about and the more interesting is the narrative, the more enjoyable is the experience likely to be. On the other hand, it should be noted that references to historical narrative in the interviewees was made in generic terms. There were no references to specific historical events. The only exception to this were references to

World War II narratives, primarily because of personal memories of the War or of loved ones who were in the War.

The two periods in history which left the most lasting mark on Malta and its urban landscape were the Knights of St. John (1530 – 1798) and the British (1800 – 1964). Each of these two periods is linked to an important historic episode, namely the Great Siege of 1565 and Malta's role in World War II (1940 – 44). Ashworth and Tunbridge (2004: 15) explain how these historic episodes are also significant in terms of tourism product:

“Malta is strongly associated, especially in the imagination of foreigners, with two short episodes in Malta's history. The focus upon the two sieges that of 1565 and of 1940-43, has a number of clear advantages. Both are highly dramatic events, easily understood, with few historical ambiguities and with clear cut personification through heroes and villains. They are both capable of interpretation through 'experiences' and the sites, buildings and artefacts lend themselves to easy identification by the tourist. In both the local is strongly linked to the wider world through action and ideology. Malta becomes the focal point in a global struggle with which tourists can easily identify....The sieges are thus almost an ideal tourism product.....”

From this quote, it is possible to derive those narrative properties which Ashworth and Tunbridge would consider as ideal for an effective tourism narrative. These are;

- dramatic events,
- easily understood,
- with few historical ambiguities,
- with clear cut personification through heroes and villains,
- capable of interpretation through 'experiences',
- sites, buildings and artefacts lend themselves to easy identification by the tourist,
- linkages to the wider world through action and ideology,
- a narrative with which tourists can easily identify.

There are numerous sites in Valletta and elsewhere in the Grand Harbour which enable the visitor to see, and even physically touch, tangible evidence of these two remarkable narratives, thereby making the narrative more powerful and real and thus the experience more interesting and enjoyable.

8 Conclusion

In urban design literature, sense of place is often attributed to three elements namely physical setting, activity and meaning. In this paper, I consider one element, namely meaning, and examine the extent to which meaning of place impinges on the tourist experience.

Buildings and urban spaces communicate meaning but the meaning of buildings, spaces and artefacts are subjective and can be read and interpreted differently by different people according to their background and culture. The paper also discusses narrative, this being another way how the tourist can derive meaning from the experience. By means of narratives, tourists are able to visualise past events, a process reinforced by heritage sites which enable tourists to see, and even touch, tangible evidence. This makes the narrative more real and thus the tourist experience more interesting and enjoyable.

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