

Questioning the Urban in Urban Tourism

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What is the Relationship between Cities and Tourism?

The relationships between cities and tourism are much wider than the scope of this chapter. Much tourism clearly occurs outside cities, but the importance of cities is easily argued and only the most relevant aspects of these interactions will be considered here. Most tourists originate from cities and most either seek out cities as holiday destinations in themselves or use services or visit attractions located in cities while staying on holiday elsewhere (Page 1992, 1995; Berg et al. 1995; Borg et al. 1996; Law 1993, 1995). However, more directly relevant for the purpose here is to specify those aspects of cities that contribute towards a tourism that not only occurs in cities but is also distinctly urban. It is these characteristics that relate the specific activity of urban tourism to the distinctive forms and functions of cities and underpin much of the discussion of policy.

The urban central place occupies a pivotal position within the functional hierarchies in the wider regional hinterland. Furthermore, and to an extent contradictorily, cities exist within functional networks with each other often regardless of, and separate from, their regional or national context. This is particularly marked in tourism where a mixture of inter-urban co-operation and competition can create various sorts of national or inter-urban and often international tourism circuits. Finally, urban tourism is characterised by variety in two senses. The variety of facilities on offer to visitors, and thus the variety of types of holiday experience, is in itself one of the main attractions of cities to tourists. Equally, these facilities are rarely produced for, or used exclusively by, tourists but are shared by many different types of users: in short, the multifunctional city serves the multi-motivated user.

It is clear that the relationship between cities, their forms and functions, on the one side, and tourist activity, on the other, has been so close and longstanding that the difficulty has been to separate the two rather than find links between them. Therefore, while tourism exists to an extent in all cities (there is no city that does not receive a single visitor), the importance of its impact varies not only with the magnitude of the tourism flow but more significantly with the type of city that accommodates it. There are

simply many forms of urban tourism and many types of tourism city, and even adding the adjective “heritage” to both tourism and urban does little to reduce the variety. Finally, it should be remembered that although it will be demonstrated that cities are clearly important to tourism, this does not automatically imply that tourism is important to cities.

What is Urban Tourism?

Urban tourism is best defined as the overlap area between a number of adjectival tourisms (Fig. 1). In particular it contributes to two large general categories of tourism that have been labelled “special-interest” and “place-specific” (Ashworth 1995). Special-interest tourism is the pursuit while on holiday of interests that most probably are also pursued outside the holiday. The interest of people on holiday in what the city has to offer is only an extension of the same interest that they commonly express when not on holiday: these urban tourists are not therefore engaging in some strange obsessive holiday behaviour explainable in terms of tourism. Similarly, the supply of urban attractions is usually a response less to tourism demand than to much wider social needs and is not, therefore, explicable within tourism either. Place-specific tourism is where the tourism attraction is the sense of place itself, which may be composed of many broadly defined cultural attributes, structures and atmospheres. Although all tourism occurs somewhere and all places are unique, this form of tourism specifically uses this unique quality, rather than the generic characteristics of a place, as the tourism product.

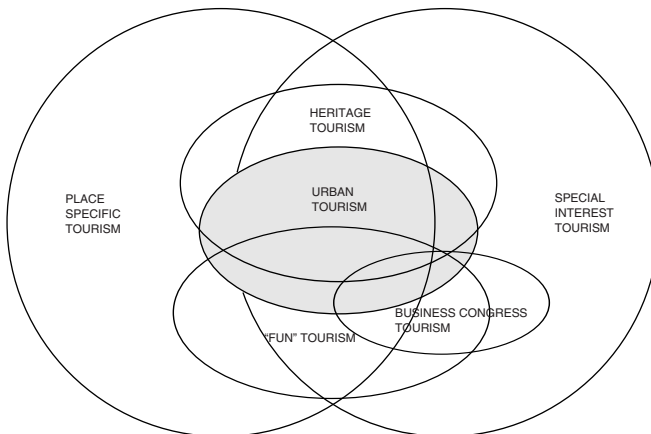


Fig. 1 Types of tourism

The motives of tourists who visit cities are so enormously diverse as to defy any attempt at comprehensive listing. Pleasure and entertainment in discretionary time makes use of the equally diverse facilities of cities. Similarly, heritage tourism is essentially both special-interest and place-specific, but only accounts for a part of each of those categories. It overlaps strongly with cultural tourism, which quite clearly encompasses, although is wider than, heritage tourism. More narrowly, art tourism can be defined as the tourism consumption of the artistic products and performances of a culture (though the original creativity presented need not be indigenous to the place of performance). Not all culture, heritage or art originates in cities, has been assembled in cities or is expressed by them. Most, however, are and only cities have the critical mass of such resources to attract and satisfy tourism demands. Many visitors to cities are motivated by some form of business rather than pleasure, although the two usually overlap to a large extent, either with pleasure being supplementary or, as in much congress tourism, with the unique place-specific characteristics being an integral part of the attraction for the visitor.

Questions About the Urban Tourist

Why Do Tourists Visit Cities?

Travel in general has grown continuously over the past 30 years and travel to cities could be viewed as just a reflection of that reality. Most gateways, largely airports, are located in or near cities as is most of the infrastructure for the support of travellers. In an increasingly urbanised world it is not surprising that cities account for an increasing proportion of visitors. An explanation of the growth in urban tourism would need to look more closely at the words “tourism” and “urban” here.

Cities are accumulations and concentrations of economic and political power, organisations and activity, as well as of cultural, entertainment and leisure activities. A large part of travel to cities is motivated by the first rather than the second set of attributes. Cultural centres such as Florence may accommodate 4.2 million visitor-nights and Salzburg 1.9 million, mostly motivated by leisure demands but cities with far fewer cultural pretensions, such as Hamburg (4.1 million visitor-nights), Lyon (2.9 million) or Zurich (2.0 million), have also benefited from the general growth in travel (Berg et al. 1995; Borg et al. 1996). We just travel more and not only for tourism.

Equally, even if the traveller can be designated as a tourist because of the discretionary nature of the motive to travel, the question can be posed, “are all tourists in cities urban tourists?” The use of an adjective before the noun tourism usually indicates a specific type of tourism experience (as in for example “cultural tourism” “gastronomic tourism”, “sport tourism” and even the urban antithesis “rural tourism”). To what extent, therefore, is tourism in cities a similarly distinctive experience derived from the urban nature of cities? Here we can distinguish between tourism in cities, that is tourism to facilities that happen to be located in urban areas but would be equally satisfying to the visitor in a different non-urban milieu, and urban tourism *sui generis* in which it is urbanicity itself that is the primary motive of the tourist. What is this urbanicity, which we could contrast, for example, with its antonym rurality? Louis Wirth’s famous essay on *Urbanism as a way of life* (1938) identified the essential defining characteristics of cities as density, heterogeneity and impersonal social interaction that Tönnies (1887) called *Gesellschaft*, leading among other things to freedom and anonymity. Cities are certainly characterised by density and diversity, whether of functions, facilities, cultures or peoples, which distinguish the urban from the rural. It is these characteristics that must be central to the urban nature of cities and thus define urban tourism, whether the tourism activities principally engaged in are classified as culture, entertainment or even shopping. It is notable that visitor surveys asking tourists in cities about what they actually do constantly reveal the dominance of very vaguely formulated activities such as “sightseeing”, “wandering about”, “taking in the city” and “getting among the people” (*onder de mensen* in Dutch). The serendipitous *flâneur* prevails over the determinedly directed tourist. This seems to get close to defining the significance of the urban in urban tourism.

How Do Tourists Consume Cities?

A number of generalisations, amounting to conventional wisdom, can be made about the way tourists consume the urban product (see for example Pearce 2005). First, tourists consume cities selectively. The tourist will experience only a very small proportion of all that the city has to offer. This is unsurprising and would apply also to almost any urban user, whether tourist or not. It could be argued that the tourist has more limited time, as argued below, and more limited, or perhaps only different, knowledge than locals. For whatever reason, there is plenty of empirical evidence of the consequences of these limitations. The spatial range of tourists, as bounded by their individual space-time budgets (Dietvorst

1994), results in the well-documented compact and spatially delimited tourist urban region (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990, 2000), normally confined to one or a number of compact tourist “islands” of interest, leaving most of the city ostensibly tourist-free.

Secondly, tourists consume cities rapidly. The length of stay at urban tourism destinations is much shorter than in beach resorts. The average length of stay of beach resort holidaymakers is around 10 days, this being an average of two-week bookings (in most resorts around 50%) and one-week and shorter excursionists. The length of stay in even major urban destinations is rarely more than 2 days. This is not just that the motives for travel to cities are more varied and include many short stays not primarily motivated by holidaymaking (Berg et al. 1995). Even the world’s most renowned cultural tourism centres such as Florence, Venice or Bath cannot generate long stays in any single centre (e.g. Salzburg, 2.0 days; Venice, 2.3); major world cities do little better (Paris, 2.2; Berlin 2.5; London 5.6) (Borg et al. 1996). Centuries of historical experience and cultural productivity are consumed in a few days. In smaller cities the stay is better measured in hours and any single urban feature, however renowned as a “must-see” attraction, will generate stays better measured in minutes than in hours.

Thirdly, tourists consuming urban experiences cannot be relied upon to return repeatedly. Beach tourism is well known for repeatedly attracting regular visitors to the same place and indeed often to the same hotel. However, it cannot be assumed that because cities offer varied attractions they will automatically generate similar repeated visits. Although urban tourists are quite likely to continue to patronise cities in general, there are various intrinsic reasons why specific cities may tend not to foster such a loyal clientele and generate return visits. First much urban tourism could be labelled Michelin/Baedeker collecting. Tourists have pre-marked sites and artefacts that must be visited if the place is to be authentically experienced. Once “collected” a repeat is superfluous and the collection must be expanded elsewhere. Ironically, the more unique the heritage experience, the less likely it is to be repeated. A generalised place product (London’s *Covent Garden*, Paris’ *Champs-Élysées*, Barcelona’s *Ramblas* and the like) is far more likely to be consumed repeatedly than an original and specific place product (Luxor, Pisa or Niagara Falls find that their spectacular historical, natural or architectural attraction will tend to be a once-in-a-life-time experience). Equally, the more renowned and unique the urban product the more difficult it is to renew and extend the range of tourism products on offer. Places can become imprisoned in their immutable uniqueness as expressed through the unvarying but stringent expectations of visitors. Cities such as Bath, Florence or Weimar are so

strongly focussed, especially in the imagination of the visitor, on a specific tourism product that change is difficult and an attempt to sell industrial Bath, modernist Florence or medieval Weimar would have little success. Cities with a more varied and diffuse range of possible products, such as London or Paris, have fewer such difficulties in extending or changing the product line.

Finally tourists consume cities capriciously. Many of those concerned with the management of cities may assume that their city has an assured and permanent tourist allure. Although all tourism, being a discretionary activity deeply embedded in psychological and social contexts (Pearce 2005), is influenced by inevitable changes in these contexts, there is reason to believe that urban tourism is especially vulnerable to quite rapid shifts in fashion and changes in consumer taste. The choice of urban tourism destination is a fashion-driven activity and like much cultural consumption, part of contemporary lifestyles are constantly being redefined. Even such seemingly immutable values as those derived from heritage and cultural expression cannot be relied upon to generate an unchanging tourist interest as the popularity of historical periods and artistic styles waxes and wanes. Thus what, where and who, is currently popular, and, in terms of the time span of developmental investment, will still be as popular in 10 years, will depend upon a fickle and fashion-conscious market.

Questions About the Urban Tourism Industry

The initial problem with posing questions about those who might be described as the tourism industry is to identify the subject. The “urban tourism industry” is characterised by diversity and extreme organisational disintegration. It would include those delivering various accommodation, catering, travel or entertainment services directly to the tourist, those assembling and marketing tourism packages, those managing the resources from which such packages might be composed and even public sector agencies with an interest in the impacts of tourism rather than its direct management. Not only are these various agencies diverse, often operating with quite different objectives and working methods, most of them also serve non-tourism markets, such as those providing mundane retailing, public transport or public utilities, or are mandated to prioritise non-tourism objectives such as those providing most heritage and cultural services. Many such agencies may not even be aware that they form part of a tourism industry and if they were made aware could be indifferent or even hostile to such knowledge.

Do You Know Who Your Market Is?

There is a widespread assumption that we can distinguish, isolate and identify a distinctive urban tourism market, and, by derivation, an equally distinctive urban tourist, and urban tourism product located in an urban tourism space. For if we cannot so distinguish a market, it becomes next to impossible to examine and manage it. There is a stereotypical average urban cultural tourist, who has been described with a remarkable degree of unanimity by many academic observers (Prentice 1993; Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990, 2000; Boniface and Fowler 1993; Page and Hall 2003; Pearce 2005) and is embedded as axiomatic by most tourism practitioners and policy makers. The almost universal caricature of the stereotypical “Baedeker/Michelin tourist” is 45–65 years of age, with a higher than average income available, education, and travel experience, holidaymaking independently in a group of two and staying in hotel accommodation. However, like all such stereotypes, this conceals both a large variety within the identified group and the existence of many other categories of urban tourist.

Any attempt to list urban tourism markets is doomed by diversity to be incomplete. The back-pack “Lonely Planet”/“Rough Guide” market may be as numerous, although not so profitable as the Michelin/Baedeker market. The cruise-stop market, the bachelor “stag-night”/discount airline market, the professional conference market, the health care market and the various niche activity markets for *aficionados* pursuing hobbies ranging from gastronomy to war-gaming, are only examples of urban tourism markets, which could easily be extended. However, this is not to suggest that because cities cater for a wide variety of tourist demands markets need not be segmented, separated and targeted as with any other product. The questions, “do you know enough about the tourists you are trying to attract to entice them to visit your city and, once they are there, do you know enough to manage their experience?” are however rarely satisfactorily answered.

Who Is Paying your Costs and Contributing towards your Benefits?

To the tourism industry many of the resources of the city appear to be zero-priced, freely accessible public goods. Public places and public facilities are either completely free (as public space) or usable well below cost (as with most museums, historic buildings and many public services). Such a fortuitous windfall resource may appear ideal to the tourism

industry. It has however two dangers. First, freely accessible public goods tend to be over-used to the point of depletion as the interests of the individual and of the public are contradictory, a general condition known as the “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968). Secondly, the urban resources utilised by the tourism industry are not freely provided in that they are paid for by other users or by the community as a whole. The tourism industry therefore becomes a parasitical free-rider on the facilities that someone else is paying for. This is probably an untenable situation in the long term with a number of national and local disadvantageous consequences. The solution is the very familiar one of reconciling costs with benefits between individuals, economic and social objectives and between the public and the private sectors. In economic terms, this means internalising the externalities, usually fiscally, and in spatial terms, balancing costs and benefits at different spatial scale jurisdictions. In short, cities are not cheap to run and maintain and someone has to pay but there are many ways of deciding who, how much and how.

Can You Change Fast Enough?

Many of the characteristics of urban tourist behaviour described above have implications for the management of the urban tourism product. A rapidly consumed, fashion-driven activity can only be effectively managed by an organisation capable of either constantly discovering and attracting new markets or continuously changing or extending the product range on offer. The very fragmentation of the urban tourism industry may make such longer term strategic planning less likely and more difficult.

Questions about the Tourism City

What Is the Tourism City?

In one sense the phrase “tourism city” is without meaning. All cities to a greater or lesser degree receive tourists and there is no “tourism city”, at least outside the purpose-built tourism resort developments, which hardly count as cities, that does not also serve other urban functions. Therefore, it can be argued that either all or none of the world’s cities are tourism cities. Nor is it possible to select some arbitrary level of economic dependence at which a city becomes a tourism, as opposed to a non-tourism, city. Indeed,

as will be argued later, the cities with the most value to tourism and attracting the largest number of tourists are generally those in which tourism has the least relative significance.

That said, it is possible to identify many different types of tourism city determined not only by the motives and expectations of the majority of visitors but also by the way the city, or at least its policy makers, sees itself (Fig. 2). Again this is best expressed as a series of overlapping, changeable categories rather than discrete and stable types. Even the broad category of “tourist-historic city” (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990, 2000) has many variants. The large show-case capitals for example, with their imperial and national collections, symbols and associations, are quantitatively the most important attractors of cultural tourists but at the same time have many other important, usually far more important, non-tourist and non-heritage functions. Conversely, the almost perfectly and completely preserved heritage “gem” cities are indisputably tourist-historic but form only a small, and in many ways unrepresentative, proportion of tourist-historic cities. The designation “art city” has been given to places which were not only the physical locations associated with artists and their products but where the place itself, including usually its physical structures, becomes inseparable from the creative works. Salzburg is Mozart and Memphis is Presley. But the category “art” and its celebration in festivals can be so widely drawn that clearly not all art or festival cities are necessarily tourist-historic.

Cities are also more than centres of commodifiable culture and heritage. They are centres of complex economic, retailing, educational, entertainment, sports and many more activities, all of which can provide either the principal or the secondary motive for a visit. It is worth noting here that almost all these functions of cities exist in the service of both external and internal markets, and from the viewpoint of the facility it is rarely necessary or even possible to separate the two.

Which Urban Problem Are You Trying to Solve with Tourism?

A city creating policies for tourism or embarking upon marketing campaigns targeted at tourists needs to be clear about which urban problem tourism is being recruited to solve. Tourism may be seen as contributing jobs and incomes to a lagging economy, extra direct and indirect taxes to hard-pressed local authorities, animation to area regeneration if only by putting people on the street, especially when other facilities are closed, and creating a liveliness that is itself an attraction (Burgers 1995); it can give

critical support to local services and facilities which would otherwise be uneconomic, enhance and promote local place identity, civic consciousness and local self-esteem through the flattering attention of visitors to local attributes and contribute to many more objectives of urban policy.

Tourism facilities that are themselves not economically viable are often included in multi-functional projects (Snedcof 1985) because of the positive externalities they contribute to developments and districts. The point is that each of these is possible but, equally, a failure to define which of these is intended is likely to result in none of these goals being satisfactorily achieved.

Likewise, of course tourism brings local costs, whether economic, such as bidding up the price of scarce factors of production, the foregoing of development opportunities elsewhere and the free use of public facilities financed locally; social, such as undesirable demonstration effects, social change or disruption of a social balance; or just physical through congestion and a crowding out of locals. Ultimately, the fundamental questions, especially for the public agencies involved, are “does our city need tourism and if so, to what extent, of what sort and, above all, for which purposes?”

Have You the Management Philosophies and Structures to Do It?

Tourism can play many roles in the city but at the same time little of the city was actually created by, or is managed principally for, tourism. Tourism is generally only one use of urban facilities and urban space and is in competition with other uses that will often be prioritised, if only for reasons of local political accountability.

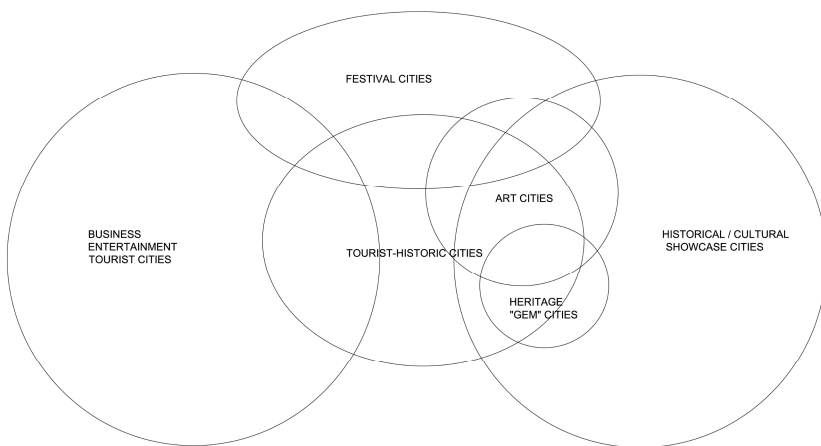


Fig. 2 Types of tourism city

This has many practical implications for the management of resources that were created for, and dominantly serve, other multiple uses. Few cities have the management structures in existence that can manage diverse multiple uses.

The dilemma facing urban tourism development is that while each place is in, at least potential, competition with every other place, success or survival will largely depend upon cooperation between places. Networking and packaging, joint promotions and the regionalisation of place brands are among the usually recommended policy solutions to many of the weaknesses of urban tourism outlined above. If competition is unavoidable, so also is cooperation and both may occur in the same places. An application of this concept of “cooperation” is essential and requires skilled and sensitive management.

Whose City Is It?

The tourist is in one sense consuming a different place product than the local users, even if this product is created from the same resources and even co-exists in the same physical space. Therefore there is always an underlying question, “whose place is it?”

Conventional wisdom in tourism studies has generally separated tourists from residents. In simple terms, the important distinction has been that one is on holiday and the other not and many consequences are seen as stemming from this dichotomy. Local residents are generally accorded primacy in the claim to the city, and this assumption underlies much local management policy. Additionally local uses are often accorded a higher intrinsic moral or even aesthetic value than outside uses, especially tourism.

In many instances, however, the tourist and the local resident cannot usefully be distinguished in terms of motivation or behaviour. Much urban tourism is a “special-interest” activity, which is by definition only a continuance on holiday of accustomed interests and activities. Tourism consumption occurs for such a wide variety of reasons, within varied behavioural patterns and in diverse forms, as to render the separation of tourist from local not only impossible but also often quite irrelevant. The tourist is just the resident on holiday: the resident just the tourist between trips. Secondly, the nature of urban tourism leads to a convergence between local and tourist consumption which can only be understood through creolisation and social convergence/divergence models (Ashworth 2003). Thirdly, the globalisation/localisation debate, which is quite central to considerations of tourism at the destination, is best conflated within

“glocalisation” models rather than any spurious idea of insider community against outsider tourist. Fourthly, the shaping and management through policy of place image, place identities and socio-political cohesion or inclusion/exclusion generally precludes any distinctive tourism policy or management being shaped.

Thus it is likely that tourism does not exist in the city as a discrete set of resources, motivations of individuals, activities or field of management policy. The tourist, the industry and the local policies are all too embedded in other, much wider considerations for a successful isolation (Fig. 3). Indeed the pretence that the tourist actually exists in a discrete sense comparable to other product consumers, is a major obstacle to the furtherance of both the theory and the practice of tourism, not least but not only in cities.

Paradoxical Answers

The idea that there exists an automatic and universal harmonious symbiosis or, conversely, just as inevitable and inherent a contradiction of goals and behaviours, between cities and tourism, is assumed rather than questioned or explained. The relationship poses more questions than can currently be answered with confidence.

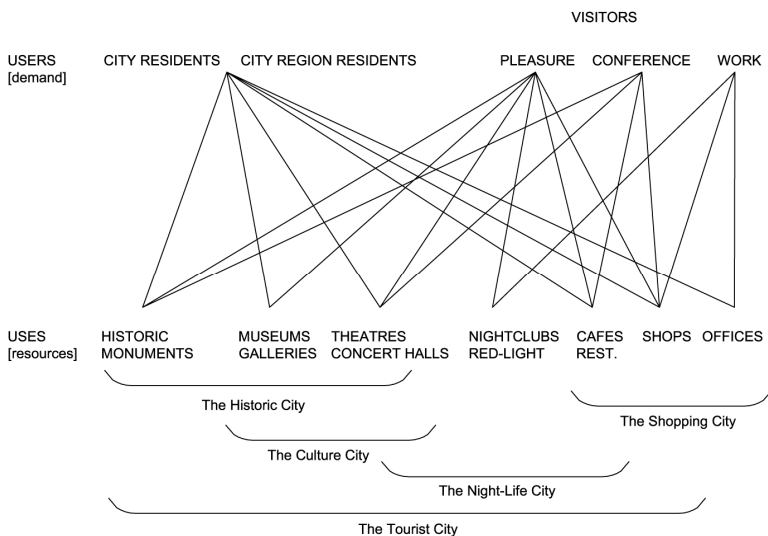


Fig. 3 The tourist city and other cities (from Burtenshaw et al. 1990)

We are left to reconcile a series of paradoxes:

Urban tourism is important: but we know little about it. This imbalance in attention was noted by Ashworth in 1989 and reiterated in 2002.

Cities are very important to tourism: tourism is not very important to cities or at least to most cities, most parts of cities, most of the time (Ashworth 1989).

Tourism can contribute substantial economic benefits to cities: but the cities whose economies most need the contribution of tourism are likely to benefit the least. It is the cities with a large and varied economic base that gain the most from tourism but need it the least.

Many tourists visit cities: but tourists are largely invisible in cities. The cities that accommodate most tourists are large multifunctional entities into which tourists can be effortlessly absorbed and are thus largely economically and physically invisible.

Tourists make an intensive use of cities: but little of the city has been created for tourist use. Ultimately from a number of directions we arrive at the asymmetrical relationship between the tourist and the city, which has many implications for policy and management.

Tourism needs cities: but cities do not need tourism.

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