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Conceptualising the Expansion of Destination London: Some Conclusions

Andrew Smith

> You are now
> In London, that great sea, whose ebb and flow
> At once is deaf and loud, and on the shore
> Vomits its wrecks, and still howls on for more
> Yet in its depth what treasures!
>
> (Shelley 1820)

Introduction

In the growing literature on city tourism a distinction is made between *tourism in cities* – that which incidentally occurs in urban environments – and *urban tourism*, where tourists are specifically interested in consuming urbanism (Ashworth and Page 2011). The preceding chapters suggest London tourism – particularly that which inhabits non-central areas – is dominated by urban tourism. This world city attracts people who want to be in London and experience the chaos and diversity of a postmodern metropolis (Gilbert and Henderson 2002). Whilst they might regard London as all consuming, these visitors are themselves consuming the city, a process that implies negative

consequences. As Hall et al. (2013) suggest, place consumption connotes degradation, destruction and displacement and there is evidence that in London increasing numbers of tourists (visiting a broader set of locations) have resulted in such consequences. Examples noted include the impacts of tourist rentals on the availability/affordability of housing (Chapter 3), the commodification and denigration of park environments (Chapter 10) and creeping touristification, which makes peripheral neighbourhoods less liveable (Chapter 2). In qualifying these effects, it is important to emphasise that tourism is merely one contributory factor. The problems of gentrification, commodification and homogenisation are caused by a combination of tourism working alongside other agents of change.

Most academic critiques of city tourism and its consequences tend to be quite negative, but we should not be too quick to label tourism in London as a problem. This is the city's second biggest 'industry' after financial services and one that supports thousands of jobs. Despite its negative connotations, tourism consumption is not necessarily a bad thing. As Hall et al. (2013) note, it may entail acts of assessment, appreciation, affection, assimilation, even enlightenment. Tourism in London, particularly 'new urban tourism', allows people to encounter difference, to share space with people from different backgrounds and to demystify 'the Other'. London is not immune to racism and religious intolerance, but the UK capital is generally recognised as an example of a super-diverse city where different people co-exist in relative harmony. The tourism slogan adopted by London and Partners, 'See the World Visit London', may be overselling the city's global credentials, but it contains an essential truth. People can understand the world better by spending time in London.

The other reason we should be wary of dismissing tourism as a problem is that its reputation as a parasitic activity is often exaggerated. Tourists are not merely consumers of city destinations, they are contributors: they not only bring income and investment; their very presence animates places (Pappalepore and Smith 2016). Rather than decrying the erosion of London's culture by outsiders, Newland (2008: 231) argues that 'tourists and immigrants continue to bring London to life'. This point is also made by Gilbert and Henderson (2002: 130) who feel that in London 'the tourist is an active and necessary part of the drama'.

In cases of overtourism, where visitor numbers have outgrown the capacity of destinations to host them, the obvious response has been to try to disperse tourism into more peripheral zones. This has been an ambition of policy makers in London for several decades. In recent years, non-central areas of London have certainly hosted more tourists. However, the increasing popularity of the periphery has supplemented, not substituted, rising demand for central districts. This is not tourism dispersal, it is tourism expansion. The ten preceding chapters of this book have helped to enhance our understanding of how this expansion has occurred and in this concluding chapter these ideas are drawn

together into an overarching conceptualisation. Based on the work in this book, it would appear that tourism expands in a city destination *spatially*, *conceptually* and *temporally*. These three types of expansion are discussed further below.

Spatial Expansion

As Robert Maitland argues in Chapter 2, London's peripheral neighbourhoods are becoming popular destinations, a process driven by visitors' search for distinctiveness. Central London is regarded by some tourists as an environment 'staged' for tourists, rather than an authentic experience. This is emphasised by descriptions of central London as 'a fairy tale city of delights' that is regarded as a separate, tourism-oriented space even by people who live in London (Newland 2008). Therefore, increased tourist penetration of non-central districts (particularly those in in East London) can be interpreted as an attempt to access 'backstage' regions which better represent contemporary London. The irony is that this penetration inevitably paves the way for the touristification, commodification and homogenisation of these districts. Pioneering tourists then search further into the periphery to find distinctive and authentic neighbourhoods – perpetuating this cycle of change. This process has parallels with many other transformative cycles – including the way alternative cultures are co-opted by mainstream producers. The relevance of this analogy to the discussion here is highlighted by Gilbert and Henderson's work on London guidebooks (2002: 123):

> many of the places and activities identified in self-consciously alternative [London] guides published in the 1960s and 1970s were incorporated into guides aimed at a much broader audience in the 1980s and 1990s.

The authors suggest this did more than just change the way London was understood, it also 'fundamentally changed the nature of those places taken from the margins to the centre of the tourist experience' (Gilbert and Henderson 2002: 123).

In the past two decades places like Shoreditch, Spitalfields, Kings Cross and Borough have shifted from being niche destinations for alternative tourists, to mainstream sites that are part of general tourist itineraries. Places like Brixton, Bermondsey, and Peckham now seem to be undergoing the same transformations, with a whole series of peripheral neighbourhoods from Wood Green to Woolwich being touted as 'the new Shoreditch'. In this context, one can understand Robert Maitland's provocative prediction in Chapter 2 that this process will inevitably extend geographically beyond inner city peripheries to suburban locations. The current Mayor of London – Sadiq Khan – is from Tooting, a suburban district in South London. In a recent interview, he was asked what

he would recommend tourists should do when they visit his local area and his answer revealed a lot about the tourism potential of London's suburbs:

> I think you'll find some of the best food in London, not just in the great curry houses on Tooting High Street but also in Tooting Market and Broadway Market. The Bingo Hall in Tooting has got a great organ and Frank Sinatra played there. Tooting Common, Wandsworth Common and Clapham Common are not far. But the people are the best thing about Tooting. (Khan cited in TimeOut 2018)

The combination of ethnic diversity, food markets, twentieth–century heritage and green space, alongside the capacity to interact with Londoners, represents the core appeal of many non-central districts. Following New York's example, London is increasingly exploiting diversity as a key tourism asset and suburban London has high levels of religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. There are also more traditional sightseeing opportunities. The most significant religious buildings built in London over the past fifty years are the temples and mosques located in the suburbs.

The potential of tourists to stay in peripheral destinations and experience London 'like a local' has been enhanced greatly by the rapid increases in the amount of accommodation available for tourists to rent. This phenomenon is explained by Clare Inkson in Chapter 3. Inkson describes this as an 'unplanned expansion' of accommodation provision – one akin to developing more traditional capacity without proper consideration of social impacts. The rise of Airbnb and other companies offering easy access to short term rentals has encouraged tourists to visit peripheral parts of London but it has come with considerable costs. These problems are caused by the failure of regulators to keep up with the new integration of the residential housing and tourist accommodation sectors.

The discussion above suggests that tourism territory expands like a frontier – creeping out in a radial fashion from the centre due to various demand trends, cost advantages and – to a lesser extent – tourism policy. This explains the main way that tourism territory is expanding in London. But there are other ways too. Chapters 4 and 5 by Anne Graham and Claire Humphreys discuss two examples of infrastructure that have provided the basis for new destinations in the urban periphery: airports and sports stadiums. There has been considerable investment in these types of projects in London over the past 20 years and whilst these facilities principally act as functional transport/leisure sites, they are now being redesigned to facilitate wider consumption and repurposed as catalysts for destination development.

Peripheral parts of London are attractive to some tourists because of their authenticity and everyday qualities, but more generic entertainment and consumption-oriented destinations are also emerging in London's periphery. Many of these are centred on airports or sports stadiums. For example, Wembley,

North Greenwich and Stratford are currently being redeveloped as significant destination zones with indoor and outdoor arenas acting as anchor projects. These places now provide cheaper and more convenient alternatives to the West End, serving densely populated residential zones nearby but also visitors coming from further afield – facilitated by advanced public transport infrastructure. These are UK versions of the suburban entertainment districts that are said to be emerging in the US. Spirou and Judd (2014) argue that suburbs and ex-urban locations are now investing heavily in projects that seek to emulate the success of city centre redevelopment schemes. These authors conclude that 'this functional refocusing of these cities may prove central to the next wave of urban change' (Spirou and Judd 2014: 46). In London, it seems unlikely that the dominance of the city centre will be challenged, but attempts to create new city centres (e.g. at Canary Wharf, Stratford and Croydon) may result in a revised spatial distribution of tourism that reflects this new urban structure.

The analysis contained within this book – particularly the work of Andrew Smith in Chapter 6 and Simon Curtis in Chapter 8 – also reveals a third type of spatial tourism expansion. Alongside the touristification of existing neighbourhoods (type 1) and the development of new purpose-built destination districts (type 2), we can see extensions which facilitate the consumption of central districts (type 3). Vertical extensions and opening up riverside spaces provide new ways of viewing the Cities of London and Westminster. For example, in Chapter 8 Simon Curtis notes how the developments along the South Bank have created new tourism areas for London, but their principal function according to Gilbert and Henderson (2002) is to direct the tourist gaze back towards the historic sights of the North Bank. In a similar manner, the new high rise structures that have been built in London over the past decade allow iconic buildings and spaces to be consumed more easily – providing a distanced perspective that is otherwise very difficult to achieve in a densely built-up city. New, dynamic experiences are offered atop new high-rise structures (e.g. slides, glass floors), but the principal attraction remains viewing London icons. This third type of spatial expansion is inherently connected to existing tourism centres: vertical and aquatic extensions reinforce the primacy of London's iconic districts rather than deconcentrating them.

Conceptual Expansion

The expansion of tourism territory is usually regarded as a physical and spatial phenomenon, but some of the chapters in the book highlight that tourism also expands by reaching into new spheres. There are two good examples of this in the book. In Chapter 3, Clare Inkson highlights that private homes are increasingly rented out to tourists. The appeal of this type of accommodation is partly based on the notion that tourists are able to penetrate the domestic realm – allowing them to experience London 'like a local' and 'feel at home' in the

city. These ideas infuse much of Airbnb's advertising. Inkson rightly questions whether this actually happens, but the fact that tens of thousands of Londoners now offer their houses, flats or rooms for short term rent represents an extension of tourism – and capital - into the private sphere. The idea of the backstage again appears relevant here. In the contemporary era, tourists are not only interested in visiting 'real' neighbourhoods where Londoners live, they now want to stay in their houses. This is changing the dynamics of local neighbourhoods – creating new rhythms and rituals, but also disputes and displacements. London-based sociologist Lisa Mackenzie (2017) has tweeted about her experiences of this phenomenon, noting 'The Friday afternoon sound of wheeling suitcases all over East London as the airbnbs take over'.

The case of Unseen Tours discussed by Claudia Dolezal and Jayni Gudka in Chapter 7 represents another example of how tourists are being invited into secret/hidden worlds. Many of these tours traverse central places which are familiar to tourists: these are parts of London which are very much *on* the beaten track. Nevertheless, the insight and different perspective provided by guides allow familiar places to be seen in a different light, and overlooked features to be acknowledged. Uncovering secret or unseen places is a noted trend in city tourism. The enduring popularity of London's Open House event – when, for one weekend a year, people are able to access residences, offices and other private buildings – is part of the same trend. Whilst the penetration of tourists and tourism capital into the private sphere can be interpreted as the part of the ceaseless commodification of everything in the neoliberal city, the case of Unseen Tours suggest there can be more progressive outcomes.

Temporal Expansions

Popular destinations can manage high levels of demand by trying to disperse visitors over a larger area, but also by dispersing them into less busy time periods. The temporal expansion of tourism is also evident in London as noted by Humphreys in Chapter 5 and Eldridge and Pappalepore in Chapter 9. Demand is lower in winter months, so it makes sense to promote winter events, including sports events, but also Christmas-themed attractions and light installations. The Lumiere festival was created to provide a reason to visit London in January and the success of this event highlights the value of interventions that even out seasonal disparities. Eldridge and Pappalepore's discussion of Christmas lights also highlights a different type of temporal expansion – extending tourism into the night – something which has perhaps been neglected in existing analyses of urban tourism. Chapter 9 highlights the appeal of light-based attractions, but there are other ways tourists can enjoy London at night which extend beyond obvious night-time entertainment such as theatres, restaurants, bars and clubs. Many museums now offer regular late-night opening, with some (e.g. the Natural History Museum) offering sleepovers inspired by the popularity of the *Night*

at the Museum book and film. In 2018 The Museum of London announced that their new building (due to open in 2023) will open 24 hours a day. Other famous attractions are also offering late night experiences, including London Zoo which offers Zoo Nights on Fridays during the summer months. The Royal Observatory in Greenwich offers regular stargazing events and there are a range of other tours (e.g. ghost tours, zombie experiences, wildlife spotting) which deliberately capitalise on nocturnal experiences and atmospheres.

Challenges

This book has focused on how London tourism is expanding, but it is perhaps useful to conclude with a more general assessment of the tourism related challenges facing the city. The city has undergone significant changes over the past two decades, with the new structures, attractions and governance introduced in 2000 providing the platform for the city's current popularity as a destination. Whether or not this success can be sustained in the face of competitive challenges and external factors is an important question. London is now accepted as one of the great world tourism cities, outperforming Paris and New York and only rivalled in terms of international arrivals by Hong Kong and Bangkok. But new competition is emerging in the Middle and Far East with Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore pursuing ambitious tourism targets. What will allow London to remain in the top tier of tourist cities, when faced with such well-endowed competition?

The key to London's success as a destination has been the way it has constantly added new layers of interest – often in new areas – to supplement established attractions and districts. Although there are many new projects planned, London (unlike its new rivals) does not have to expand tourism provision by building new districts. Instead, its existing, multi-layered urbanity can be further exploited. This is a significant competitive advantage over cities that are still being 'made'. Success will also depend on sustaining London's reputation as a world capital of culture – as a place where culture is produced rather than merely consumed. The 1960s were a key turning point for the city: this was when London became the place where fashions and tastes were defined (Gilbert and Henderson, 2002). This role has been retained ever since, and will need to continue if London is to provide new reasons for tourists to come – and to come back. Unfortunately, there are signs that London is becoming a victim of its own success. The price of property is now so high that many cultural pioneers are being forced to find cheaper places to live and work in other parts of the UK (e.g. Margate) or in rival cities on the continent (e.g. Berlin).

Economically, Destination London is a great success story, but the pressing challenge is to make tourism a more progressive force. Working conditions in the tourism and hospitality sectors remain a concern and plans for stricter controls on immigration may make it harder to fill positions. Ironically, whilst

Brexit may make it harder for London to find tourism staff, it is making London a more popular destination – at least in the short term. The falling value of the pound since the announcement of the referendum result in June 2016 means London has become relatively cheaper for most international tourists.

The ceaseless expansion of tourism makes it impossible to prevent tourism from influencing different districts. As Lim and Bouchon (2017) argue, tourism now permeates entire metropolitan areas and cannot be contained in dedicated bubbles. The city's ambition should not be to restrict tourism, but to better protect the integrity of urban districts from some of the negative effects of touristification. More regulation is required to try and safeguard community assets from real estate speculation, especially local pubs, small venues and independent shops. Ensuring London remains a lively and liveable city also makes it a more interesting place to visit. In Chapter 3 Clare Inkson discusses the need for tighter regulation of tourism rentals to protect the social fabric of local neighbourhoods. In London, there are now maximum limits on the number of days that home owners can rent out properties for short term lets (90 days), but much stricter limits apply in comparable cities like Amsterdam (60 days) and New York (30 days). This type of regulation is a key priority as the lack of affordable housing is perhaps the biggest challenge facing London: there are currently 243,000 people on the waiting list for social housing in the city. Aligning that figure with the vast number of properties now available for short term rent (over 60,000 are now listed on Airbnb), highlights that radical action needs to be taken to increase the availability and affordability of housing. Short term rentals are one small contributor to this problem, but a contributor nonetheless.

Instigating change will require organised and vocal opposition. Where developers have encountered resistance from those seeking to protect London from (over)commercialisation, there have been some significant victories. The famous Undercroft – the graffiti-strewn home of skateboarding in London – was threatened by the regeneration of London's South Bank district. But a campaign to keep the space succeeded and it is now legally protected as 'an Asset of Community Value'. In Greenwich, plans for a new cruise ship terminal were withdrawn after local campaigners challenged the project on the basis that it would lead to damaging levels of air pollution – another big issue currently facing London. These cases highlight that Londoners may need to follow the lead of their peers in Barcelona and Berlin – and actively campaign against key projects – if they want to restrict the over-expansion of the tourism sector.

In terms of managing visitor volumes there are already some measures in place to restrict overcrowding. For example, some London Underground stations near popular tourist sites restrict access at weekends (e. g. Camden Town and Covent Garden). There are also proposals to redesign some of London's most crowded areas to make them better able to cope with large numbers of people – including plans to pedestrianise Oxford Street. However, it seems

likely that soft approaches – promotions, events and persuasion – will provide the main ways that London attempts to direct people away from overcrowded sites. Like in other cities, the official policy remains to disperse tourists into more peripheral districts and away from tourist hotspots. But this book suggests that, whilst it is possible to realise tourism growth in non-central areas, this doesn't necessarily mean tourism levels will decline in the centre.

Ultimately, to address many of the challenges facing Destination London, better tourism planning, and/or better integration of tourism considerations into urban planning are required. Just as tourism is neglected in the academic literature on cities and urban development, it is neglected in strategic planning processes. This situation seems to be getting worse. In the 1990s, 60 per cent of London's 33 Boroughs had a specific tourism policy or strategy but recent research suggests this figure has now dropped to 12 per cent, with only 4 of the 33 Boroughs producing a dedicated tourism plan (Maxim 2017). The integration of tourism into wider planning documents reveals an equally dismal picture. In 2000, over half of London boroughs had a dedicated chapter on tourism in their main planning document(s). That figure has now dropped to a measly 15 per cent (Maxim 2017). This means we now have a situation where tourism is growing rapidly in London, and expanding into more peripheral parts of the city, but fewer local authorities are doing anything to plan and manage it. Deficient planning has been caused by the massive cuts that Local Governments have had to endure over the past decade, with non-statutory functions like tourism jettisoned to shore up funding for front-line services. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the London Development Agency (LDA) did undertake some useful tourism planning and development work, but since the LDA was abolished in 2012 London-wide planning and management has also been neglected.

In the absence of tourism planning by the public sector in most Boroughs (other than basic development control and licensing), this function has been delegated to Business Improvement Districts. These are partnerships of local interests who agree to pay a levy of between 1–2 per cent on the rateable value of their businesses. These monies are then ring-fenced to be spent on local initiatives such as improvements to the public realm, tourism promotions, event projects and safety initiatives. Fifteen BIDs were established by the LDA, but there are now over 50 operating in London. BIDS have introduced some welcome initiatives and helped to improve some areas (see Chapter 9), but the fact we are now relying on precarious, unaccountable partnerships to produce tourism plans for urban districts just demonstrates how far tourism planning in London has regressed. Whilst BIDs are well placed to assist business development, it is highly questionable whether they can advance social goals and progressive agendas. Therefore, revised governance arrangements – ones which not only give greater prominence to tourism, but allow tourism's social effects to be managed – are an urgent priority.

Mind the Gaps

The previous chapters in this book have highlighted a number of tourism-related issues facing London. However, the analysis here represents merely a sample of key challenges and trends and some important issues have been neglected in this volume. There are at least five notable omissions. First, by focusing on tourism spaces and places, the book has neglected the labour involved in servicing tourists and tourism. Work in the tourism and hospitality sectors is notoriously precarious, and the way working practices are changing in the gig economy requires detailed and careful analysis. A second key issue neglected by the book concerns ongoing restrictions that affect the accessibility of London. Tourism interests have long argued that it needs to be cheaper and easier for tourists to obtain visas to visit London – particularly the lucrative Chinese and Indian markets. The UK's proposed withdrawal from the European Union will also present new barriers that will also discourage international travel. A third key issue is the important influence of representations of London in literature, television and film. These are mentioned in Chapter 8 by Simon Curtis, but require further dedicated analysis. The worlds of Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter and other fictional figures continue to motivate many tourists to visit London. The incongruous desire to see imaginary London in the flesh in perhaps best evidenced by the long queues to see the Platform 9 ¾ installation at Kings Cross railway station. Like many of the other examples discussed in this book, this type of tourism has the potential to push tourists and tourism into parts of London not normally regarded as visitor destinations. Leadenhall Market, Claremont Square and Stony Street are all non-central locations that have become visitor attractions thanks to the *Harry Potter* films.

A fourth issue not covered adequately in this book is the role of London as a business tourism hub and the wider relationship between London's business functions and its tourism sector. One notable development in this sphere is the attempt to reposition the City of London – the historic square mile where most financial institutions are based – as a visitor destination. This mission has inspired a project to develop a 'Culture Mile' between Moorgate and Farringdon. This is a joint initiative between The City of London Corporation and the main cultural institutions located within their territorial boundaries: The Barbican, The London Symphony Orchestra, the Museum of London and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In the past the dominant role of the City of London as a place of *work* meant it was always relatively quiet at weekends, but this is changing as this area is reimagined as a visitor destination. This district highlights the way urban areas are now being redesigned to service a mixture of office workers, citizens at leisure and tourists. Similar projects are being introduced at London's other financial services hub: Canary Wharf. Fifth and finally, this book has not properly addressed the changes to London's high

streets caused by the rise of online shopping and ongoing economic malaise. Many of London's high streets, particularly those in peripheral districts, are struggling to maintain their traditional functions as places to shop. Given the significant role of the high street in London's peripheral districts, this trend may slow the emergence of many of these non-central districts as visitor destinations.

A Research Agenda

This book aimed to address the relative absence of work on London tourism noted by Maxim (2017) and other authors. However, further work is needed to develop some of the key issues raised. In particular, it is important to examine whether the types of tourism growth London is currently experiencing, and the ways tourism is expanding in the UK capital (spatially, conceptually and temporally), are relevant to other world tourism cities and other cities in general. The relationship between city tourism and urban change still needs to be better understood. This is a reciprocal relationship and needs to be analysed as such: city tourism contributes to urban change, but urban change also influences tourism. Understanding how tourism intersects with wider urban processes – of gentrification, globalisation and commodification – is crucial to understanding the role tourism plays in contemporary cities – particularly global cities like London. We also need to better understand how tourism relates to other urban activities, e.g. commuting and consumption – and how citizens experience their own cities as tourists.

The expansion of the visitor economy in London is contested, but more research is needed to understand why protests against this rapid growth seem to be much less significant in London compared to other world tourism cities like Berlin or Barcelona. The extreme volume of tourists in the UK capital means London provides an ideal laboratory to undertake much needed research on measures to reduce overcrowding. Future research on this theme will no doubt make use of the new ways of measuring, modelling and mapping crowds, including those based on mobile phone applications. Tourism is usually defined as an overnight stay by a non-resident and this book has also highlighted the need for more research on the increasingly varied ways that London and other cities are consumed at night. Finally, in an era of neoliberal austerity, when governments are constantly seeking new revenue streams to offset reductions in public funding, there is a need for more research on the potential for tourist taxes and other charges. As Pine and Gilmore (1999) point out in their famed account of the 'experience economy', the capitalist economy tends to expand by charging a fee for things that were once free. In this context, it seems likely that future London tourists will be asked to contribute to the upkeep of parks, museums and other public services.

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