

Shared Playgrounds: Contrasting Visitor Perspectives on Tourism Precincts in Cities

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Abstract

Tourism is forming an increasingly significant component of the social and economic fabric of many major cities around the world. The quality of life for the residents of a city can be both degraded and enhanced by tourism and its associated developments. On the positive side, tourism can generate significant job opportunities and income within the urban economy. Conversely, tourism can come to dominate certain sections of the city to the detriment of residents' interests. Land uses and services change to become more geared to satisfying the tourists' desires, which can make it more expensive and less convenient for the residents to satisfy their basic living requirements. Tourists can also take over valued leisure places and spaces that were previously the domain of the local residents.

Within this broad range of possible effects, this paper considers one aspect of the relationship between tourism and the quality of urban life. The focus is on tourism and leisure precincts within the city of Sydney, Australia — spaces and places that are shared by both tourists and residents. In particular it considers how Sydneysiders view these precincts and whether their perspectives on these places differ significantly from those of tourists. It also considers the extent to which tourism might contribute to or detract from the experience of local users of these places.

This study was based on a set of six contrasting precincts within Sydney:

- The Rocks, an historic precinct adjacent to the CBD and Sydney Harbour;
- Darling Harbour, a festival marketplace-style precinct that was originally developed as a centrepiece for Sydney's Bicentennial celebrations in 1988;
- Norton St, Leichhardt, Sydney's "little Italy" located in the inner western suburbs;
- Parramatta, Western Sydney's main CBD and an area containing a rich array of historic sites;
- Manly, a beachside suburb which also fronts the harbour and is accessible by ferry from the CBD; and
- Cronulla, Sydney's southernmost beachside suburb.

In each of these precincts a questionnaire survey was administered to both tourists (n=914), defined as those residing outside the Sydney metropolitan area, and visitors who were from Sydney but did not reside in the immediate local area (n=848). The mix of tourists and Sydney visitors varied from precinct to precinct, with tourists forming the majority in The Rocks, Darling Harbour and Manly and the minority in the other precincts.

The surveys gathered a range of data relating to the visitor experiences within each of the precincts. Visitors were asked a series of questions that were intended to indicate levels of satisfaction with their visit to the precinct. The main focus of the surveys, however, was to understand the extent to which each precinct was performing certain sets of functions for both sets visitors. To this end, the questionnaires included a series of functional statements about precincts, e.g. “[Precinct name] is a good place for people watching”. Visitors were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The questionnaires administered to each set of visitors differed in terms of the number of functional statements (30 for tourists, 26 for Sydney visitors). The wording of a number of statements was also slightly modified so that it was applicable to each set of visitors, e.g.:

“A visit to [name of precinct] is an essential part of a visit to Sydney” in the tourists’ questionnaire; “Every Sydneysider should visit [name of precinct] in the Sydney visitors’ questionnaire. The functional statements were developed from previous qualitative studies by two of the authors in a number of Australian urban tourism precincts (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005, 2007; Griffin, Hayllar & King, 2006; Griffin & Hayllar, 2007).

The findings revealed strong similarities between the two sets of visitors in terms of their views on their precinct experiences. Sydney visitors were generally most satisfied with their experiences in precincts that could be considered the most “touristy” – The Rocks, Darling Harbour and Manly. Significantly, these precincts have been deliberately and substantially developed and promoted for tourists, yet Sydney visitors tended to disagree with the proposition that they were “mainly for tourists”. Clearly, Sydneysiders did not hold the view that these areas had been taken over or overwhelmed by tourists. Rather there were shared views with tourists that the precincts were performing similar, important functions for them, such as making them feel comfortable and relaxed, being good places for people watching, and possessing a lively/vibrant atmosphere. In relation to most functions, Sydney visitors also rated the performance of the precincts in almost identical order to the tourists. Precincts that were performing well, or poorly, for the tourist were also generally performing well, or poorly, for the Sydney visitor. For example, the limitations of Parramatta as a place for leisure or tourism experiences was acknowledged by both groups.

Overall, the study reveals that the interests of tourists and Sydneysiders in relation to leisure/tourism precincts, rather than being in conflict, are actually quite compatible. The creation of precincts such as Darling Harbour and The Rocks, ostensibly for tourism, has apparently contributed positively and powerfully to the leisure resources and quality of life of the city's residents. Sydneysiders would appear to acknowledge the lifestyle benefits of being able to be "tourists" in their own city.

References

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