

MASS TOURISM, CULTURE AND THE HISTORIC CITY

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out a theoretical framework for analysing the impact of mass tourism on historic cities. It emphasises five main elements – production, consumption, the composite tourism product, temporality and spatiality – and sets out key differences between the historic city prior to, and under conditions of mass tourism. Building on this framework it is proposed that management of the historic cities may be more usefully thought of in terms of innovation than traditional public policy or governance approaches. The key innovation challenges and innovation responses are set out and the paper concludes by considering the notion of tipping points in the development of cities and of innovation.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of tourism in historic cities is, in many instances, the challenge of mass tourism (see Urry 1990; Shaw and Williams 2002). This is best illustrated by such iconic cities as Venice or Bruges, but is also true of global cities such as London and Paris. The focus on mass tourism is an important reference point, as it highlights distinctive features of tourism production and consumption which need to be understood in any attempt to develop effective tourism management policies. Mass tourism in many historic cities is underlain by economic

mechanisms which have more in common with mass tourism coastal destinations than with historic cities which attract small numbers of mostly independent travellers.

The first half of the paper sets out two models of the tourism system in the city of pre mass tourism, and of mass tourism. These are necessarily simplified, and idealised, representations whose main function is to counterpoint the distinctive features of the latter. Building on this, the second half of the paper considers the challenges that mass tourism in historic cities poses in terms of «tourism management», in its broadest sense. It is a challenge that requires responses by all the interested parties – or stakeholders – in these historic cities. As such, it is useful to address the responses to the challenges in terms of innovation and innovation policies. What types of changes are required, how are these to be managed, how are they interlinked, and what are the barriers and facilitators of a successful transformation to a more socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable system of tourism production and consumption that is embedded in the social, economic and built fabric of the city?

1. THE CHALLENGES OF TOURISM IN HISTORIC CITIES

Tourism has distinctive features of production and consumption, which stem from three main features: the nature of tourism activities, the embedding of tourism in wider social and cultural systems, and the symbiotic relationship between tourism and culture.

First, we have to note that although tourism has become an increasingly commodified product or experience, many features of the tourism complex are only partly commodified. For example, visitors may walk into a historic city, wander around its streets, enjoy viewing the beautiful historic townscapes, and absorb the ambience of its famous culture – and he or she may do all of this without paying a single euro. In other words, many aspects of tourism are public goods for which no direct user fees can be charged. They are considered to be both «non-excludable», which means that their use can not be limited to those who pay, and also «non-exclusive», which means that their use by one individual

does not exclude them being used by others. If a private investor was to devote resources to improving the appearance of a building – a small scale innovation – then the owner would be unable to exclude «free riding» by other companies and individuals. As a result, individual owners tend to be unwilling or unable to invest in some types of innovations which would enhance the quality of the tourism experience in the historic city. State intervention may therefore be needed to socialise the costs of certain types of tourism innovation (Hall 2005). This is linked to the tension which exists between competition and collaboration. Commercial operators in the historic city are in competition with each other for tourism expenditure – whether they are hotels, restaurants, shops selling souvenirs, or tourism attractions charging entry fees. They would probably all benefit from co-operation to enhance the nature of the tourist experience, allowing them to increase the prices charged to tourists, but their ability to co-operate is at best shaped by, and at worst undermined by, different forms of competition.

Serageldin (1999) provides an useful economic framework for understanding tourism as a source of value, specifically with respect to urban heritage. He contends that heritage provides three sources of value. Extractive use value derives from goods that can be extracted from the heritage site; for example, payment of entry fees to particular sites. Non-extractive use value is derived from the services it provides. These are complex, and not all directly generate income, but a number of service outlets – shops, restaurants, hotels etc. – do extract income from the tourists, or what Serageldin terms «recreational use value». Finally, historic buildings have non-use value, or what may be termed «existence value»: the simple existence of the historic building yields value to those who would feel impoverished if it was destroyed or allowed to deteriorate. This is the value attributed to Venice by most people whether or not they have visited, or ever will visit, the city. In short, measures to enhance (perhaps conserve) the townscape, or individuals sites, may generated an increase in extractive value, but some of the non-extractive value will be appropriated by other commercial users and the existence value will be (largely) impossible to price and charge fees for. Therefore, the existence of public goods lies at the heart of understanding and managing tourism in the historic city.

Secondly, the tourist historic city is also characterised – as are all tourism destinations – by strong temporal rhythms. The availability of «supply» – whether entries to a historic building, or beds in a hotel – is highly time specific (Weiermair 2006). If the supply is not sold at on a particular time, then it can not be stock piled and sold on another occasion. If you do not sell entry tickets to a cultural festival, you can not resell these in another time period. Historic cities are usually subject to less seasonal variation in demand than are, say, most coastal and rural tourism destinations, but they are subject to temporal variations in demand which are seasonal, across the week, and intra-diurnal. It may mean there is intense pressure to maximize tourism numbers at particular times, even though the costs of this are considerable in terms of congestion, noise, devaluing the tourism experience, or hindering the lives of local residents.

Thirdly, the tourist historic city is highly spatialised, whether in terms of how tourists perceive and experience the city or in how it is organized in terms of economic structures or the lives of local residents. One aspect of this is the characteristic clustering of tourism activities – their position in the historic evolution of the city means that the key sites are concentrated in particular areas within the urban core. In practice, the logistics of how individual and organized tour groups manage their limited time means that they will focus particularly on those historic sites which are in relatively close proximity. This tends to amplify and spatially polarise both the costs of tourism, and the distribution of what Serageldin (1999) terms extractive and non-extractive use values.

Fourthly, tourism in the historic cities occurs, to varying degrees, in *shared spaces*, and this is far more marked than in specialised tourism resorts. Thus the streets of central London or Paris are filled with a mixture of different types of tourists and day visitors, commuters who work in the city and local residents. The values they obtain from these spaces are mutually dependent (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004): for example, it may be the critical level of demand generated by tourists that support many of the facilities (whether museums, theatres, or restaurants) which are enjoyed by local residents, but at the same time tourism demand may drive up the prices that are charged, reducing their use by residents. Or the late night practices of some tourists may

conflict with the sleeping practices of local residents and other tourists.

This leads us to our fifth point: *tourists interact with local host communities*, although this is strongly temporalised and spatialised. These interactions directly shape tourist experiences, as well as the everyday practices of local residents. Tourists may actively seek out the local community as being part of the tourism experience, and a mark of authenticity, or, perhaps more commonly, these communities provide the backdrop to tourism practices. Communities may be overwhelmed by, resist or welcome mass tourism but – in any event – this underlines that tourism does not occur in abstract or dedicated tourism spaces, but rather is embedded in local social and cultural systems.

Finally, we need to emphasise the symbiotic relationship between tourism and culture, which Zukin (1995: 23), in context of urban change, explained in terms of the «production of space, with its synergy of capital investments and cultural meanings, alongside the parallel «production of symbols». Tourists are semioticians – their experience of the city is constructed around well defined signs or makers (Dann 1996). These markers are increasingly themed and branded, so that «complexity is commodified and reduced to a recognisable formula» (Meethan 2001: 126). Place marketing has become intimately connected with the promotion of the tourist historic city (Ashworth and Voogd 1990) as well as with other locales. It has also become closely linked with processes of urban regeneration (Hall and Hubbard 1998), as evident in cities such as Liverpool and Genoa. This can be problematic, reducing heritage to «bundles of social and economic opportunity» as cities compete for investment (Philo and Kearns 1993: 18), or leading to «serial reproduction» or imitative innovation.

In summary, there are a number of distinctive features of tourism in historic cities and these are influential in shaping the nature of the composite tourism experience and or product. The emphasis on «composite» is deliberate – for the tourism experience is shaped by interdependencies in experiences, products and demand. The tourism experience is delivered as a set of functionally linked tourism services by both a range of tourism enterprises – hotels, restaurants, transport companies, retailers, tourist attractions etc. – and by local communities,

by other tourists, and by a range of public and voluntary bodies. In other words, the tourism experience is «multiply-conditional»: it depends not only on the performance of a number of producers, and the community, but also on other tourists present at the site of the experience. How do they behave when wandering around the city, visiting sacred shrines, or as audiences at cultural festivals?

the tourist is far from being a homogeneous unit, as is often suggested by the way that standardised tourism statistics are presented. Instead, tourism markets at any one point in time are highly segmented in terms of not only motives, but also the resources (material, cultural and time) that are available to the tourists. [...] Moreover, the tourist experience is a multi-functional leisure activity (Ryan 2002), and the motivations and practices of individual tourists change not only between tourism trips but within them (Ryan 1997, 2002).

2. MASS TOURISM: A COMPOSITE EXPERIENCE

Before proceeding to examine mass tourism, we first set out a simplified model of the composite tourism experience of pre mass tourism in the historic city (*Fig. 1*). This reflects much of the preceding discussion, seeing the tourism historic city as being shaped by five main components. First, a form of tourism production which is strongly fragmented (a scattering of private enterprises, and some key attractions some of which may be in public ownership) and the prevalence of public goods. Second, strong spatiality effects, with tourism activity and its impacts being strongly polarised around a few key sites in the city. Thirdly, temporal polarisation with tourists being present mostly in the day, when their co-presence with local residents travelling to or from work and services is significant. Tourism numbers, overall, remain relatively modest, and they tend not to be the dominant population group even in the areas surrounding the key historic sites. Fourthly, consumption which is necessarily multi-dimensional, but also relatively homogeneous in being mainly driven by an interest in culture and history, and requiring minimum amounts of material and cultural resources for

participation. Fifthly, the tourism experience, as always, is a composite one, but it is relatively individualistic and based on loosely co-ordinated components (*Fig. 1*).

With the shift towards mass tourism, there are a number of significant changes. Following Urry(1990: 14) we can apply a general definition of mass consumption to the understanding of mass tourism:

purchase of commodities produced under conditions of mass production; a high and growing rate of expenditure on consumer products; individual producers tending to dominate particular industrial markets; producer rather than consumer as dominant; commodities little differentiated from each other by fashion, season, and specific market segments; relatively limited market choice – what there is tends to reflect producer interests, either publicly or privately owned.

Under these conditions, a number of changes occur in how the model of the tourism historic city is configured (*Fig. 2*).

First, there are changes in terms of production. Mass tourism involves the movement of large numbers of tourists are relatively low costs which therefore enables the tourism experience to be extended to medium and lower income groups, even though the latter have relatively modest disposable or surplus income. But given that income is constrained in the mass market (demand is relatively price inelastic), tourism producers need to cut costs, so that these can only be provided in standardised forms with relatively minimal levels of services and facilities. This tends to be accompanied by standardization. This is based on the notion that people often travel to other places in order to experience much of what they are familiar with in their everyday lives (Ritzer 1998: 137). Ritzer (1998: 137-139) further asserts that people demand four qualities from a holiday: it should be predictable, efficient (in terms of costs), calculable in terms of costs, and highly controlled, in terms of routines and the behaviour of the hosts. The resulting demand for standardization is strongly related to the growth both of package tours to historic cities, and the emergence of standardised service provision at the destination – most iconic of which is the McDonald's located next to, or at least just around the corner from, a historic monument.

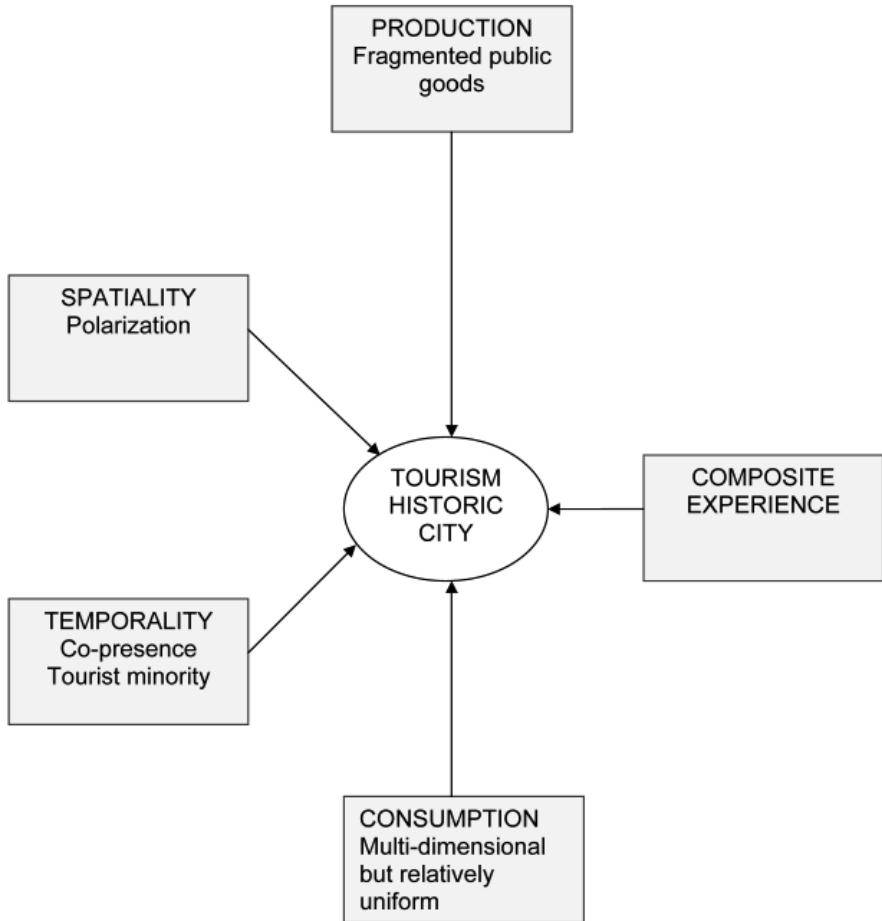


Fig. 1
Pre mass tourism in the historic city.

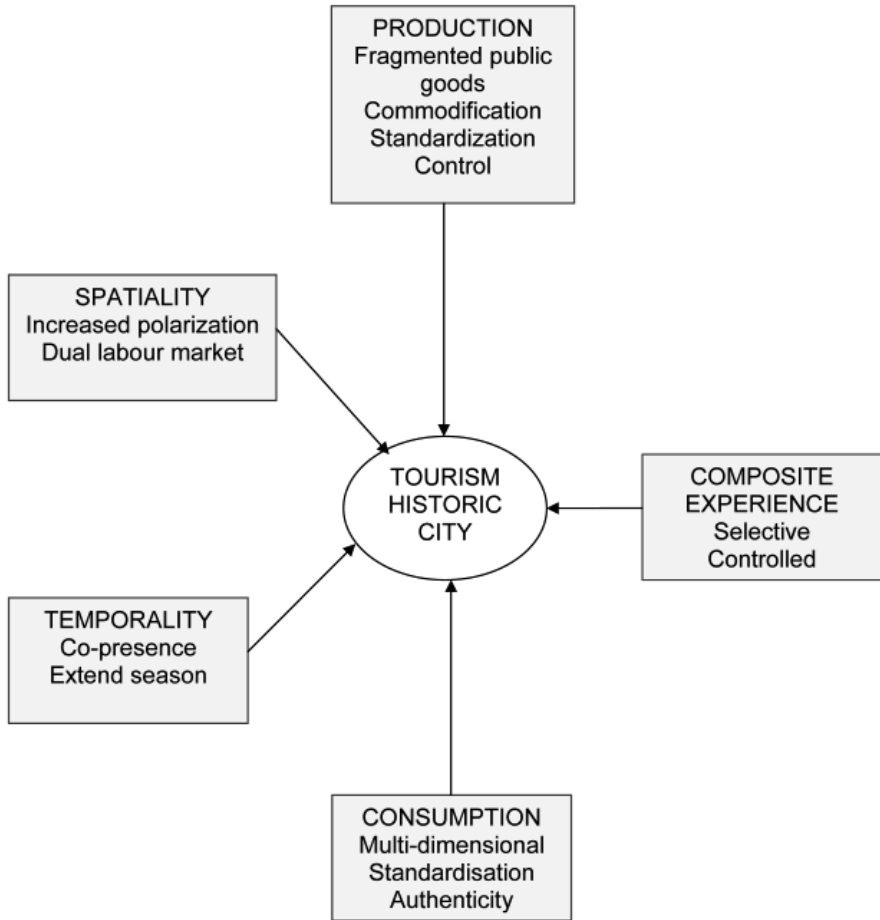


Fig. 2
Mass tourism in the historic city.

Secondly, mass tourism tends to be highly spatially polarized, and this is partly related to the construction of the tourist gaze (Urry 1990: 47) which, as noted earlier, is increasingly signposted: «There are markers which distinguish the things and places worthy of our gaze. Such signposting identifies a relatively small number of tourist nodes». Tourists are therefore channelled to a relatively small number of areas in a small number of cities, a tendency which is reinforced by the economies of scale of infrastructure provisions (e.g. airports) and of the operations of private enterprises. Agglomeration economies reinforce the development of other complementary tourism services. One of the problems of the tourist city is that, at a certain scale, the pressure exerted on the costs of living and housing make it difficult to recruit sufficient labour. Hence, the larger tourist historic cities become dependent on external labour, migrating from or commuting from other areas, which in the case of migrants may be from other countries. In other words, a dual labour market emerges, with the lower pay tourism jobs increasingly being taken by migrant workers, willing to tolerate very poor housing conditions for short term gains or because of the wage gap between their home and destination countries. This has broad parallels with Sassen's notion of the dual labour market in the global city (Sassen 2000).

Thirdly, there is continuing but changing temporal polarization. Seasonality persists, driven in part by institutions such as the timing of school and workplace holidays. However, there is also likely to be some reduction in seasonality, because of the growth of later life tourism, with the «grey» market in particular being less temporally constrained. Moreover, the growth in numbers may be sufficient to persuade some tourism attractions, shop owners etc. to extend their seasonal opening, so that there is – in terms of tourist numbers – a virtuous circle of growth. This is also driven by a more general societal shift with cultural and symbolic capital becoming more significant, and contributing to strong growth in consumer expenditure (Harvey 1987: 273-276); tourism particularly benefits in this respect from being a positionality good.

Fourth, under mass tourism conditions, the tourism experience becomes increasingly replicated and externally controlled. As Ashworth and Tunbridge (2004) comment, this means that the tourist-historic city becomes a stage for placeless vernacularism, with the local becoming

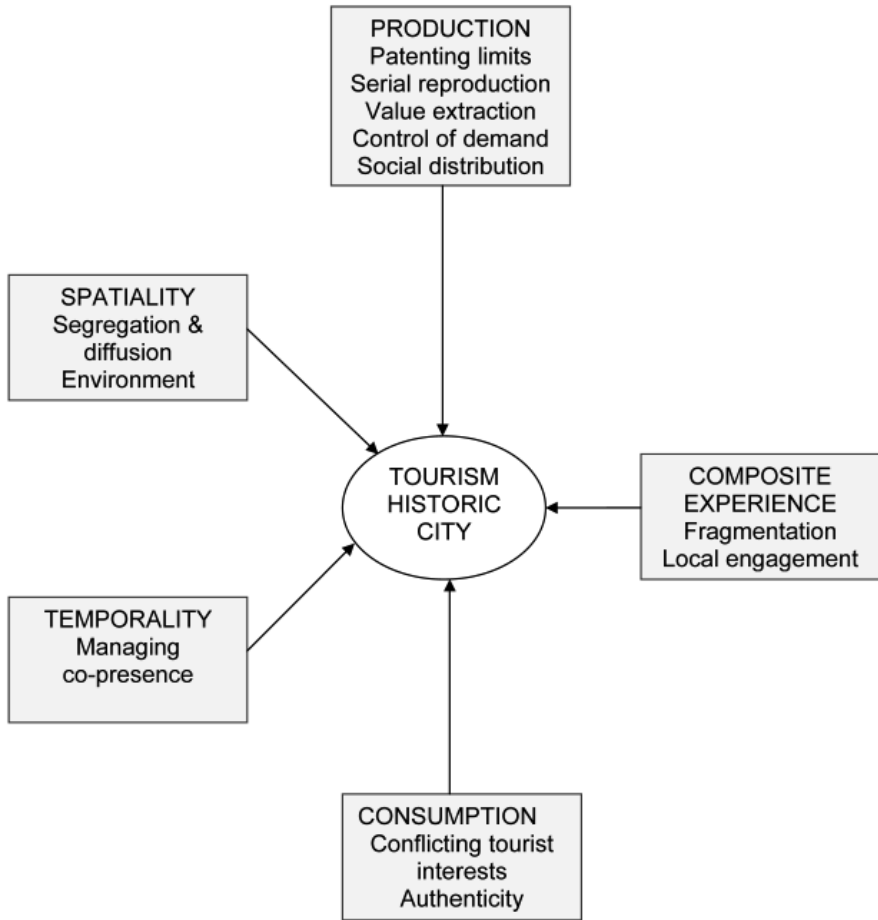
globally accessible, although at the same time it becomes divorced from locality. Temporal and spatial polarization mean that demand far exceeds the supply of authentic cultural events, or the capacity of particular sites, so that consumption comes to rely more on staged authenticity, and on investment in «alternative tourism attractions» for those visitors deterred by long queues to enter a historic site.

This means, fifthly, that the tourism experience while of course remaining a composite experience is now increasingly filtered. Not everyone can afford the privileged and sometimes high cost entry fees to particular places. Moreover, while in the city, or at the historic site, they find that their movements and access are increasingly strictly controlled. Whereas the early tourists were able «to clamber over the railings» or stand in front of a famous painting for hours, there is now an increasingly strict set of norms, assumptions and unwritten rules about the need to constantly move tourists on rapidly from site to site – but only selectively, for only so many sites can be visited within the time space budget of a single day.

3. THINKING ABOUT INNOVATION NOT POLICY

Given the growth of mass tourism in the historic city, there are a number of well known social, economic and environmental challenges that are associated with this. These are conventionally addressed through discussions of policy responses, and the notions of partnership between urban governments and private sector developers, but this tends to underplay the active roles of the private sector – especially of small and medium sized businesses – and the community in terms of responding to these challenges. To counterbalance this, it is proposed to view these issues through the lenses of innovation (see Hall and Williams 2008). *Figure 3* summarises some of the major challenges that are faced as a result of mass tourism in historic cities.

We have already noted that, in terms of production, there are major challenges around the prominence of public goods. In addition, innovation in tourism is also constrained by the difficulties of patenting or, in some other way, protecting investments made in innovations.



*Fig. 3
Innovation challenges posed by mass tourism in historic cities.*

As a result, innovation in tourism firms or indeed area improvements schemes, are, at one level, easily copied. This contributes to the serial reproduction which is highly characteristic of many areas in historic cities, particularly where there has been investment in urban regeneration. Another production issue is that tourism demand is highly controlled through the roles of tour operators and agents, who are instrumental in «delivering» groups of tourists to cities. Hence, if innovation is to stimulate growth in, or changes in the composition of demand, this has to be achieved within the framework of innovations by such powerful intermediaries. Finally, while the returns from tourism businesses are highly polarised, often with external capital harvesting a large part of the rent or income generated, the negative externalities of tourism are distributed more widely, falling on both those who are direct beneficiaries of tourism (whether as employees or employers) and those who are not.

This feeds through into the challenges faced in terms of the composite nature of the tourism experience. One issue, of course, is the disaffection of local populations, who may grow increasingly irritated at the uneven and discordant distribution of the costs and returns to tourism. This is critical in that host-guest relationships are an important component of the tourism experience. A second issue relates to the fragmented and un-coordinated nature of tourism production. Hence, one part of the tourism complex – say the principal tourism attraction – may innovate so as to increase numbers of visitors, or attract higher spending visitors, but its impact on the overall tourism experience is constrained by the ability/motivation of other sub-sectors (say hotels or restaurants) to innovate in pursuit of the same goals. Another aspect of this is that the diversity of interests in the tourism complex (Jeffries 2001), often with contradictory goals, makes it difficult to build up broadly based interest groups to represent «tourism» in policy circles.

The other two challenges for innovation – in terms of temporality and spatiality – have already been discussed to some extent. The impacts of tourism are highly concentrated in time and space. Measures to spread tourism beyond these core times and areas will not necessarily reduce the overall pressures, they may only distribute them more widely. This may be welcomed in terms of economic impacts, but far less so in terms of social, cultural and environmental impacts. There-

fore, if spatial and temporal dispersion strategies are full of difficulties, managing the co-presence of different groups of tourists and local residents may need to be the main policy priority

What, therefore, are likely to be the key areas for innovation in response to these challenges? *Figure 4* summarises some of the key points. They are not in themselves particularly surprising. On the production side, there is a need for more emphasis on economic sustainability, and to exploit the potential for IT based innovations whether in terms of marketing, presentation, or monitoring impacts. In terms of the composite nature of the tourism experience, there is a need for more emphasis on social redistribution, and on partnerships, to ensure that all key stakeholders share similar visions of the need for innovation. In terms of consumption, the emphasis needs to be on innovations that will raise individual and collective awareness. Finally, temporality and spatiality demand innovations that will contribute to new distributions of tourism activities. Looking beyond this obvious menu of key areas for innovation, what insights does the innovation literature provide into the nature of the challenges? First, drawing on evolutionary economics, we pose the question of path dependency versus the potential for path creation (Hodgson 1996). To what extent can historic cities break out from their traditional development trajectories, as opposed to being trapped into existing pathways based on a mixture of economic logic (sunk costs), inertia and the undermining of collective initiatives by conflicting interests? Sunk costs are a particular deterrent to major changes. As Papatheodorou (2006: 6) states

tourism is characterised by substantial fixed costs in transport, accommodation and in some cases technological infrastructure; airports, hotels and electronic reservation systems are good examples. These costs are largely sunk as they cannot be easily recovered due to their spatial fixity (e.g. a hotel cannot move) and asset specificity (e.g. the functionality of an airport is limited to air transport services).

Therefore, innovation is often constrained within the framework of sunk costs. Firms may focus on innovation in situ, because of the prohibitive sunk costs incurred in investing in, for example, totally new buildings (say, museums), radical renovation of shop fronts or hotel facilities, or alternative sites.

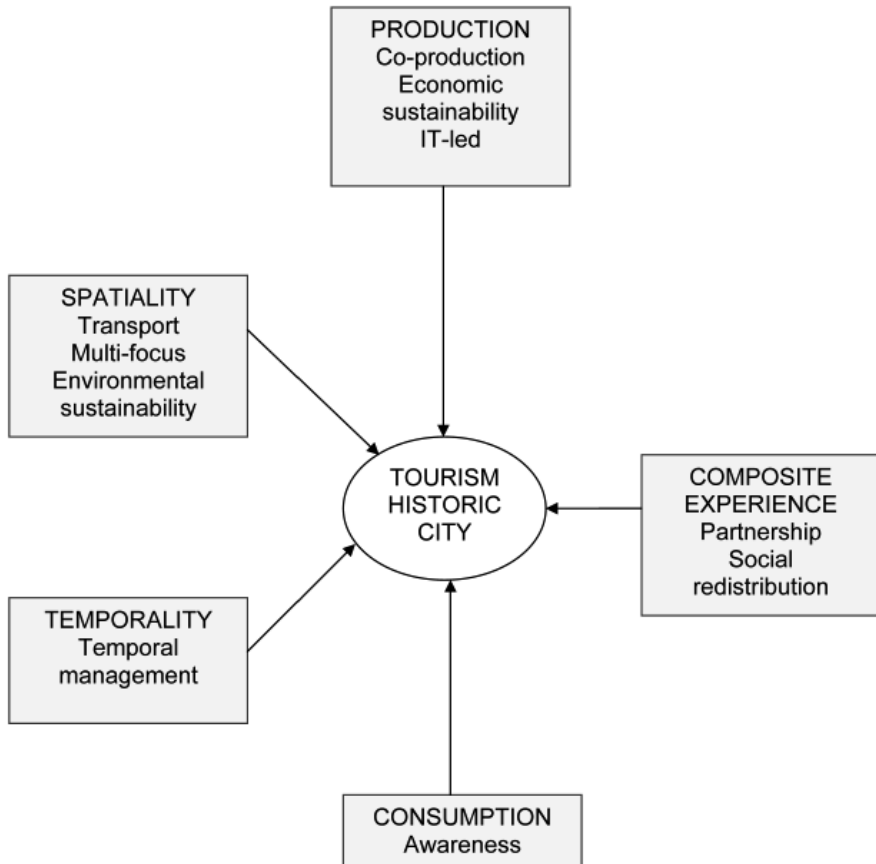


Fig. 4
Innovation responses.

Secondly, and following Schumpeter (1934), to what extent is incremental as opposed to radical or disruptive innovation required to realise the innovation responses set out in *Figure 4*? Chan *et al.* (1998) considers that there are three types of innovation. Incremental does not require a major breakthrough in either markets or technology. For example, reducing waste in a hotel kitchen, or using new types of display cabinets in a museum. Distinctive usually demands adaptation of consumer behaviour, and possibly of company organisation. For example, getting tourists to use alternative forms of travel once in the city, or to visit at different times of the day or week. And, finally, breakthrough involves a new approach in consumer behaviour, system organisation, or new technology, such as advanced electronic time ticketing, or sustainable transport to the city.

Abernathy and Clark's (1988) transilience model provides an useful summary of the innovation responses, arrayed against two axes: the degree of conservation versus disruption in terms of technology-production and market-consumer linkages. They identified four types of innovation: (a) niche (opening new market opportunities via the use of existing technologies); (b) regular (incremental), small scale changes on both axes, that are akin to serial reproduction; (c) revolutionary (involving significant new technologies but whose impact is not industry wide), and (d) architectural (which can change the entire industry, or composite city tourism experience). This presents the range of alternatives faced by the tourism interests in any city, in terms of the extent and nature of the innovation they are able and willing to accept or facilitate (*Fig. 5*). They do, of course, require different levels of collectivism. Another way of considering this is in terms of the innovators rather than the type of innovation: to what extent are the lead players genuine innovators, adaptors, or simply adopters (Malecki 2002).

Thirdly, we need to focus not only on the types of innovation but also on the capacity to absorb and adapt innovations. This is usually considered in terms of the ability to combine different forms of innovation – product, process, organization, marketing etc. – as well as the availability of financial resources, organizational capacity and leadership or entrepreneurship (see Hall and Williams 2008). But in the case of the historic city, it is not only a matter of the individual entity, but of the capacity of

the tourism complex as a whole to innovate collectively which is important, if substantial changes are to be realised. This is likely to involve the co-creation of innovation, with tourists being willing to innovate in the way they visit historic cities, or use technologies in museums and other historic sites. Tourists are «dynamic social actors, interpreting and embodying experience, whilst also creating meaning and new realities through their actions» (Selby 2004: 191). Or it may involve partnerships between firms and the voluntary and public sectors to ensure that the tourism complex as a whole moves in the same direction.

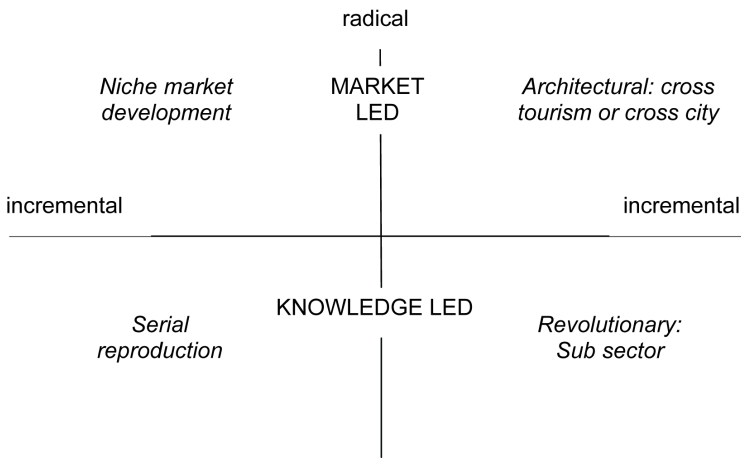


Fig. 5
Types of innovation (after Abernathy and Clark 1988).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper only provides an introduction into thinking about how we can theorise the relationship between tourism, especially mass tourism, and the historic city. It draws mainly on economic concepts, and clearly needs to be further elaborated to incorporate more nuanced understandings of urban tourism economies, let alone of culture and place.

Above all, the paper has proposed a simple model to encourage us to think more holistically about the tourism city. This has five main components: the conditions of production, consumption features, spatiality, temporality and the composite nature of the tourism experience. Using this as a template, the paper has sought to outline some of the key features of the tourism historic city, of mass tourism in such cities, of the innovation challenges posed, and of the priorities in terms of innovation responses.

The aim of the paper has not been to set out particular policy responses or recommendations, a task which anyway must be sensitive to the specificities of time and place. There is no policy template for the historic city which has meaning at the level of individual cities. Instead, the aim has been to identify key features which shape the experiences of being a tourist in such cities, and of the ways forward towards better management in these places. Innovation, represents one way of thinking about change, and the engineering of change in these cities. It highlights some of the types of changes required, and also the capacities to implement these.

At first sight, the overall conclusions can be read as an intimidating list of obstacles to the radical innovations or architectural innovations which are necessary to develop genuinely more sustainable and or egalitarian futures for all those with interests in these cities, and in mobility within them. This could be read as a pessimistic summing up. However, we end on a more positive note by considering the notion of «tipping points» (Gladwell 2001), or those critical moments in time and space when radical changes do materialise. Tipping points have three main features. First there is the law of the few – only a few key individuals need to be committed to major changes, but these must have complementary skills in terms of identifying the possibilities for change, for being able to connect ideas and people, and in being able to sell these to others. Secondly, there is the so-called «stickiness factor» – for new ideas to succeed, they have to have (or be given) memorable qualities, and there needs to be a spur to action. Thirdly, there is the power of context. As Gladwell (*ibid.*) comments: «People are more sensitive to their environment than they may seem at first. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It

is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped». This is hardly a detailed strategy for tipping over into more sustainable and egalitarian futures, but it is a declaration of belief that the right combination of actors, and structures can bring about radical changes, even when these seem insurmountable.

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RIASSUNTO

Questo saggio definisce un quadro teorico per analizzare l'impatto del turismo di massa sulle città storiche. Enfatizza cinque principali elementi – produzione, consumo, il prodotto composito turistico, il tempo e il territorio – ed enuncia le differenze di base tra la città storica prima e in presenza del turismo di massa. Nell'ambito di questa struttura si

propone che la gestione delle città storiche possa risultare più utile concepirla in termini di innovazione piuttosto che in forma di politica o di governo tradizionale. Vengono illustrate le sfide innovative fondamentali e le risposte innovative e il saggio si conclude considerando la nozione di punto critico nello sviluppo delle città e dell'innovazione.

