Tour guides as information filters in urban heterotopias: Evidence from the Amsterdam Red Light District

Konstantina Zerva [a,*], Peter Nijkamp [b]

[a] Universitat de Girona, Campus de Montilivi, Carrer de la Universitat de Girona, 10, Girona 17071, Spain
[b] Department of Spatial Economics, VU University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Department of Geography, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

ABSTRACT

An unconventional urban environment often acts as an attraction for tourists. This is exemplified by the old city centre of Amsterdam, through its urban gentrification which offers a unique tourist experience through an interplay of contradicting concepts: legal and illegal, or moral and immoral. Based on Foucault's heterotopias of informational deviance and the informational role of tour guides, the aim of this paper is to show the critical influence of the tour guide's contribution to the tourist experience of visiting these often morally contradicting concepts. Tour guides operate in this context as 'information filters', based on the tourist guides' personalities and background. To analyse this information sensitivity, five tours were examined in the Red Light District, three related to prostitution and two to Coffee Shops. Through systematic participant observation, descriptive results were obtained, which highlight the importance of the guides' personal profile in interpreting this experience to tourists.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Tours and tour guides

Within the tourism industry, one of the best known ways to gaze quickly at the particular settings of the destination is by taking a guided tour. For the participants, tours represent "a sense of being a closed, hermetic community, united in and focused on the single tourism purpose at hand" (Seaton, 2002: 311) under the tutelage of a common mentor-guide. For Damm (1982), tours refer to a technique of providing multi-stop trips so as to control and manage the complexity of travel. The tour product is shaped by the company, the guide and the tour participants (Geva & Goldman, 1991), where: the company is in charge of the tangible elements of the tour; the guide interacts with the participants; and the participants enjoy the experience of the product. The concept of the tour, its setting, as well as the role of the tour guide, could play an important part in the way tourists end up perceiving the visited culture.

The term 'tour guides' may have various synonyms, such as tourist guides, step-on guides, tour managers, or tour leaders, to name but a few (Pond, 1993). The complex content of being a guide is defined variously, as one "who leads or shows the way, especially to a traveller in a strange country" (Oxford, 1933: IV/490), or "one who directs a person in his ways or conduct" (p. IV/491), or one "who interprets in an inspiring and entertaining manner, in the language of the visitors' choice, the cultural and natural heritage and environment" (EFTGA, 1998). Tourist guides transform tourists' visits from tours into experiences (Ap &

Wong, 2001), through the (re)production and negotiation of global discourses based on cultural processes of meaning-making (Salazar, 2006). The various versions of local heritage that guides produce for the necessities of the tour create tales which turn settings and people into touristic attractions, through an amalgam of myths and culture-in-the-making (Selwyn, 1996), described in a cultural language familiar to the visitor (Cohen, 1985). Furthermore, they provide information on what to visit, how to remain safe when danger is near, and how to play with danger when it is missing, promoting group interaction, and later organising the activities relevant to the tour (Schmidt, 1979; Moscardo, 1998; Wang, Hsieh, & Huan, 2000). For Cohen, Ifergan, and Cohen (2002), guides must have a knowledge of the geography, history, culture, and architecture of a destination, but not necessarily be natives of it (Hitchcock, 2000), as well as being acquainted with psychology and sociology, so as to transmit appropriately his/her information to any tourist profile. They have to be well-trained in academic terms, and not just memorise a researched talk (Pearce, 1984). Their conduct and expertise are the focus of the touristic experience (Holloway, 1981; Geva & Goldman, 1991).

The guiding role is multifaceted: a guide can be a pathfinder or a mentor; a leader or a mediator (Cohen, 1985); an information-giver and fount of knowledge (Cohen, 1985; Moscardo, 1998), whether acquired from training or from 'know-how'; an ambassador for one's country (Holloway, 1981); a host who creates a comfortable environment for the guest (Pond, 1993); or an entertainer for the group (Holloway, 1981). His or her mission is to provide a deeper insight and understanding of the attractions tourists observe during the tour, where the latter exchange some of the freedom available to them as travellers, so as to solve problems that may occur on an organisational level, i.e. what to

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: konstantina.zerva@udg.edu (K. Zerva), p.nijkamp@vu.nl (P. Nijkamp).

see within a limited amount of time, where to stay, economic cost known beforehand, and reduced social problems from minimal interaction with natives (Schmidt, 1979), or during the tour (Geva & Goldman, 1991). Guides even use their dramaturgical skills to de-routinise the tour and ensure an enjoyable experience (Holloway, 1981).

Nonetheless, tour guides could fail to provide a sufficient learning experience (Malcolm-Davies, 2004) or specific knowledge of the setting (Pearce, 1984), while for Schmidt (1979), on occasion tour guides offer different social and political explanations of specific phenomena compared with native's interpretations (even when the guides are natives). Additionally, they could be more business-orientated, interested in selling particular images, information, or souvenirs in order to receive commission (Salazar, 2005). On another level, Dahles (2002) demonstrates that tour guides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, employ a staged and routinised performance, through the repeated narration of a standardised and politically controlled storytelling, interrupted momentarily by the guides' insinuations and jokes. Thus, in general, each guide can interpret the role in a different way (Holloway, 1981), focusing on what they know they can do best.

Pathfinders or leaders are usually locals who are well informed about their region mostly from personal experience but with no specialised training, and who provide access to non-public places, unknown lands, or simply territories not much influenced by the tourist system (Cohen, 1985). The value of their role is based on social leadership (Schmidt, 1979). They focus on instrumental components, that is, the spatio-temporal direction of the trip, the access to the backstage (Goffman, 1959), and safety control, as well as on social components, meaning the management of tensions among tour actors, the social integration of the group members, the good humour and high morale of the group, and the participation to various activities to animate them (Cohen, 1985). On the other hand, when tour guides mediate between tourists, locals and the environment, bridging and linking groups of different cultural backgrounds in order to reduce conflicts and enhance understanding of matters that can be interpreted in various ways, then they are mentors, mediators, or cultural brokers (McKean, 1976; Leclerc & Martin, 2004; Reisinger & Steiner, 2008). They operate in well-developed tourist systems and organised mass tourism, without discovering new sites or narratives (Cohen, 1985). Mentors focus on interactional components, that is, a bilateral representation between the setting and the group; on the provision of the necessary services for the realisation of the tour; and on communicative components, meaning the selection of points of interest, which inform based on the policy of the company or official tourist authorities; that is they interpret the visited culture for the visiting one, and may even fabricate data when needed (Cohen, 1985). Therefore, the guides' role can vary from providing a mere selection of attractions and information to a sophisticated interpretation of the setting.

For cultural brokers, interpretation is a significant educational tool in passing on meanings of what tourists are experiencing, how they should behave, and how they should be concerned about what they visit, thus enhancing visitor satisfaction (Moscardo, 1998; Reisinger & Steiner, 2008). Therefore, guides make links between their interpretations and the tourists' current knowledge (Reisinger & Steiner, 2008); these links are called 'conceptual pegs' which promote tourists' memory and allow them to recall the setting (Jenkins, 1974). Understanding different cultural systems while mediating cultural incompatibilities allows tourists to gaze – even momentarily – a different cultural context with the eyes of the local inhabitant. Nonetheless, this is not an easy task, considering that tourists are not a homogeneous group of people, but a mixture of various national cultures, who perceive and react differently to the same information given by the tour guide (Pizam & Sussman, 1995; Pizam & Jeong, 1996). For Moscardo, Wood, and Saltzer (2004), this happens because tourists make links between their current knowledge and perception, and someone else's interpretations.

To summarize, the most important properties of tours and tour guides, as highlighted in current investigation, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Tour and tour guides' attributes.

Setting	Tour guide
Man-made vs. natural environment	*Profile of guide*
Living vs. inanimate setting	Natives
Large vs. small group	Academic tourism training
Walking vs. bus tour	Professional status
Outdoor vs. indoor tours	*Information provided/points of interest — communicational components*
	Practical information (what to do during tour)
	Business-oriented information (consumerism)
	Personal experience
	Social integration with tourists
	Interpretational skills

Yet, existing research has focused significantly on providing information about the role of tour guides, through the analysis of different types of tours. Yet, there is no research to our knowledge which shows how significant is this varied role of the tour guide for the same tour product and the level of importance of the different properties of tour guides. When tourists say that they have taken a tour on a specific setting, like the Red Light District in our case, does that mean that they have been offered the same product? Or maybe the tour guide can change significantly the interpretation of the same setting and thus the tour product itself? For this reason, this paper compares and analyses the influence of five different guides in two different tour concepts developed in the same setting, the Red Light District of Amsterdam.

2. Heterotopia as a conceptual setting

Guided tours have a fixed and pre-determined itinerary, strategically selected so as to impose social control over tourists and, on occasion, direct them away from spaces they are not supposed to enter (Schmidt, 1979). For Pearce (1984), tourists retain global impressions of the setting they visit through the tour, without necessarily experiencing a radical change of concepts. The setting of a tour could refer to the physical environment of an event and to the encounters among the actors involved, meaning guides, tourists and locals (Holloway, 1981). For Pearce (1984), there are five basic types of environmental settings where tours can take place; man-made versus natural environments; living versus inanimate settings; outdoor versus indoor tours; walking versus bus tours; and small versus large groups. Tour guides, usually local ones, are front-line employees responsible for the success of the tour (Geva & Goldman, 1991), who encapsulate the essence of the place (Pond, 1993: vii) and make it non-threatening for the tourist (Schmidt, 1979). They are considered as key actors in providing access to both Goffman's (1959) front stage and Holloway's (1981) backstage tourism settings and localising a destination – that is, "folklorizing, ethnicizing, and exoticizing" (Salazar, 2005: 629) –, while often being the only local actor with whom tourists personally interact (Geva & Goldman, 1991).

The contribution of space in the analysis of information targets and knowledge creation has interested researchers in the past. Space is a product of social structure and role-playing relations, representing a geographical context within which individuals develop their own behaviour and interact with each other (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Andriotis, 2010). This context can 'give theoretical stories veracity and texture' (Arnould, Price, & Moisio, 2006: 107), while it can be divided into as many categories as social structures can allow. Within these spaces there are particular settings where individuals are liberated from the pressures of everyday life (Andriotis, 2010), and the tourism industry has been on a constant search for these settings so as to transform them into touristic products. The 'uncommon' or the 'unconventional' forms an attraction force for many visitors, and, therefore, an