



Research note

Co-creating the city: Digital technology and creative tourism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 May 2017

Received in revised form 20 June 2017

Accepted 5 July 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Co-creation

Creative tourism

Design thinking

Playable city

Urban studies

Heritage

Digital technology

ABSTRACT

Concepts such as the “playable city” provide the basis of concrete projects for cities around the world facing the challenge of reconciling the needs of residents and tourists. By analysing a case study of Recife’s initiative within the playable city concept, “Playtown”, this paper investigates how digital technologies can play a role in the co-creative remaking of a city, revitalising both its material and socio-cultural fabric, through the means of co-creation processes involving different stakeholders. These co-creative processes help to democratise citizenship as well as tourism (creative) practices, which are becoming more about participation and engagement. The connection to technology also makes the link between tangible and intangible culture more interactive and playful. This paper presents therefore new insights at the crossroads of urban development and creative tourism, by focusing on co-creation around digital technologies.

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1. Introduction

Many cities nowadays are struggling to reinvent themselves in a way that is meaningful for their citizens and, at the same time, attractive to tourists. Digital technology has been opening new pathways for development in many areas (e.g. Cabiddu, Lui, & Piccoli, 2013). The present paper investigates potential processes for cities to become more engaging both with their residents and tourists, by means of digital technology, in a process of co-creation. A case study methodology is used, by looking into the playable city of Recife in Brazil. This paper presents therefore new insights at the crossroads of urban development and creative tourism, by focusing on co-creation around digital technologies.

2. Creative tourism and urban spaces

Creative tourism was a term coined by Richards and Raymond (2000), and later adopted and re-defined by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (2006). Since then, many different definitions have accompanied the evolution of creative tourism practices and products. These definitions range from very narrow characterisations to very broad concepts (Richards, 2015). Recent studies have analysed some of these changes and a study by the OECD has reiterated the importance of creative tourism within the creative economy (OECD, 2014).

The relationship of tourism with creativity is not new and over time it has taken on a series of different shapes (Richards, 2011; Richards & Marques, 2012). This growing relationship also corresponds to a recognition of the (economic) value of creativity (UNDP/UNESCO, 2008), which has been expanding to other types of value more related to knowledge or human capital.

The growing importance of creativity, the creative economy, the creative industries and creative tourism, which are here considered as inter-related, has also been analysed in relation to cities, urban development and phenomena of gentrification, as evidenced by a raft of studies related to culture-led regeneration (Anttiroiko, 2014; Bagwell, 2008; Evans, 2009; Montgomery, 2003; Scott, 2006; Zukin, 1995). Creativity is often seen as a panacea, although there are also critical views on it. Despite these issues and dangers, urban developers and urban planners have been considering creative approaches and solutions for the challenges which many cities are facing. In particular creative districts are expanding and taking on new forms (Evans, 2009; Marques, 2017; Marques & Richards, 2014). New ways of looking at the city are being proposed, often involving citizens in an attempt to engage them in ‘creative placemaking’ (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). A successful example of change in the city through playful engagement is Bogota, the capital city of Colombia, whose citizens have been invited to experience urban space in a different way, trying to provide solutions to the problems there (Montgomery, 2013; Parra-Agudelo, Choi, & Foth, 2017).

When thinking about tourism development and its relationship to the city, one also cannot ignore the fact that the geographical space of the city is primarily a lived space created by residents (Landry & Bianchini, 1995; Simmons, 1994). Therefore, new approaches to

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tourism development increasingly involve local citizens (Marques, 2013; Meijer, Grimmelikhuijsen, & Brandsma, 2012) and often use new technologies to map and present the features of the city that are of interest to citizens and tourists alike.

Concepts such as the “playable city” provide the basis of concrete projects for different cities in the world which are faced with the challenge of reconciling the needs of residents and tourists. Through playfulness there is engagement from different stakeholders. The interpretation and practices of a “playable city” relate to co-creation in the way the city is made playable (bottom-up projects) but also in the way it is experienced, both by residents and tourists, as it promotes the interaction with the space. As pointed out by de Lange (2015) and discussed by Nijholt (2017), the playfulness of the city is increasingly connected to the “smart city” concept, which involves a relationship to technology.

Around the world, different playful initiatives are popping up under different forms. For example, in Denmark there is the CounterPlay festival (<http://www.counterplay.org/>; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQ9Rz9nP_AE) which “is supposed to be a prototype of the ‘playful society’, where we explore what it would mean to learn, work and live more playfully” (What is this?, <http://www.counterplay.org/>). There are also initiatives which focus on children, as the USA Playful City initiative, which aims at “Transforming Spaces into Great PLAYces” (<http://kaboom.org/playability>). However, contrarily to what could be interpreted at the first view, the idea behind the Playful City (and its awards) entails being a competitive advantage for cities, as explained in their video available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvrEDOq8JYM>. Other examples include the City of Play, in Scotland (<http://www.thecityofplay.co.uk/>) and the Dutch project Play-Full and Playful cities (http://issuu.com/thecityofplay/docs/playfu_l_cities_netherlands).

All these initiatives have the concept of “play” embedded in them, but the way they interpret it and implement it in the fabric of urban space is different. Although these projects seem to be mainly in western countries, the “Playable city” network has been developing and expanding its influence in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The project “Playable city” originated in Bristol (U.K.) in 2012 and it has now developed into a “Playable City Network” (<http://www.playablecity.com/cities/>). Although the concept can be globally used – “Playable City is a framework to think differently about the city – any

city” –, it is also locally adapted, by identifying local challenges and involving local stakeholders, many of whom are in the creative industries. It is in this framework that the articulation between the playable city and creative tourism is beneficial, on the one hand, by increasing the levels of participation and engagement in the city, with residents and tourists (for example through the use of digital installations); and on the other hand, the interaction with the city contributes to a better understanding of as well as emotional link to the place, with the advantages of not only putting the city on the map (destination branding), but also of positioning it as modern and more attractive.

Of the different cities involved in the Playable City Network, the recent developments in Recife (Brazil) are particularly interesting from a number of perspectives. By analysing a case study of Recife’s recent initiative within the playable city concept, “Playtown”, this paper investigates how digital technologies can play a role in the co-creative remaking of a city, revitalising its material and socio-cultural fabric, through the means of co-creation processes involving different stakeholders.

3. Playtown (Recife), a case study

Recife is the largest metropolitan area in the north-eastern region of Brazil. With 1,555,039 inhabitants, the city’s economy is varied, relying heavily on the Suape harbour, the technology park and being the second medical hub of Brazil. The city has traditionally had cultural potential not only based on festivals and other events, but also on creative talents from the fields of design, fashion, film or music. In the last ten years these creatives have integrated their productions with technological developments, which has led to the emergence of many new businesses.

The downtown area, called Old Recife (“Recife Antigo”), has gone through many changes in recent years. As in many other declining historic areas, such as those in the centre of Lisbon, Barcelona or New York, buildings were transformed in museums, restaurants or banks, as a way to revitalise the space. For example, Porto Digital Technological Park was created in July 2000 as the result of the implementation of a public policy strategy, and it hosts a digital creative cluster (<http://www.portodigital.org/home>). This top-down initiative, which led to public and private investment, has been acting as a driving force for the area (Rebelo, 2013) (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Detail of a sidewalk with the brand Porto Digital, 2015, by Lénia Marques.

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