

assets, etc) and last but not least open itself to the new trend of participatory tourist experiences as a means of personal enrichment, which requires a renewed political project based on social cohesion.

THE CENTURIES-OLD UNIVERSITY AS MOTOR OF URBAN TOURISM: THE CASE OF COIMBRA

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ABSTRACT

Can intangible capital often associated with a long cultural history serve as a launch pad for the tourist promotion of places? Drawing largely on a recent research project, the authors argue that the ongoing process of re-creation of Coimbra's tourist imagery will only succeed insofar as it will be able to adapt to the new trends of participatory or creative tourism.

Coimbra is a small Portuguese city and the country's university center par excellence. Its centuries-old university, founded in the 13th century, is the city's premier historical resource. This is part and parcel of a broad-reaching strategy aiming at increasing the touristic appeal of the city. Nonetheless, the city's touristic strategy remains too much centered upon the university attractiveness for the dismay of local entrepreneurs, hotel owners included, which regret the visitors short-staying in town. To achieve more consistent outcomes in tourism Coimbra must alter its strategy and diversify destinations in an integrated regional tourist policy. Moreover, we argue, beyond the university Coimbra's search for success should not only diversity and integrate other tourist attractions (religious, scientific, environmental), but also promote the regional integration of other assets (sun and sand, Roman remnants, mountains, thermal and spa

INTRODUCTION: THE LIMITS OF BRINGING THE PAST INTO TOURIST PRESENT

This paper pertains to the manner cities rebuild their significations and heritage, rendering them instruments of active touristic strategies. As such, cities pursue their own remapping regarding the ongoing worldwide process of intercity competition.

The paper focuses on the city of Coimbra (Portugal) and the updating of the signification of its university, built in the 13th century as a trigger for local tourism and economy. We explore the ongoing attempt at re-creating Coimbra's tourist imagery based on its intellectual history.

Besides their importance regarding the constitution of lifestyles of individuals and groups, leisure and tourism have become decisive factors in reorganization of territories. The post World War II segmentation of tourism unleashed a new form of tourism, urban and cultural tourism, whilst architectural, historical-archaeological and monumental factors appear especially poignant (Fortuna, 1997). If it is true that cities, while centres for art, culture and heritage, convey themselves as significant loci of touristic circuits, this modern urban and cultural tourism has undergone, in the European context, a remarkable thrust (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Richards, 2001).

This rise of tourism activity has rendered into a tendency to transform the past into a commodity of the present, as witnesses the modern cultural tendencies of revalorization of the history and memory of places (Huyssen, 2003). It is thus not surprising that this commodification of culture and history helped to create a unique tourist as a disengaged and detached figure related only at the distance with the socio-cultural environment visited. The postmodern times of decentered identities have questioned this feature. The experience of tourism may be a unique occasion to enrich one's own through interacting with others. Tourism of direct contact and participatory experiences is now shifting attention towards the visitor's subjectivity. As a plethora a recent writings sustain creative tourism is able to trigger personal growth and self-reflection (Florida, 2005; Landry, 2010; Orbasli, 2000; Richards, 2001). Self-empowerment through tourism is now seen as a creative dimension to be learnt at the closeness, not at distance, of other's people working

lives and experience. Cities as a whole and sites within them (hidden adobes of daily lives) are turned into learning grounds for one's cultural enrichment.

On this basis one may argue that representation is no more the basic ingredient of tourism. Participation takes the lead instead. This is not to negate the significant trust brought about by those writers who showed how transformation occurred in present day cities' socio-cultural, artistic, linguistic and human heritage (Lash & Urry, 1994; MacCannell, 1999; Shields, 1992; Sturken, 2008; Ward, 1998; Zukin, 1991). On the contrary, this new reading of tourism - the creative tourism rising discourse - helps to understand that the local historic narrative is not enough to promote an effective urban tourist agenda for cities.

In other words, heritage, both material and immaterial, no doubt accounts for a new tourist attraction and is deeply rooted in contemporary urban settings. But they have to be added to the experience of those visiting new sites and tourist locales. Otherwise tourism strategies risk to become exhausted and lose effectiveness.

We trust that the ongoing promotional tourist strategy followed by the city of Coimbra is one such case of foreseeable failure as it remains centred in the old-fashioned marketing strategy of promoting history by itself.

As shown below, Coimbra's tourist demand and offer are basically structured around a sole tourist attraction - the centuries-old University - and cannot comprise but a nostalgic referent of a splendid past brought to the (tourist) present. To significantly promote tourism the city has to change gears and to incorporate a set of new challenges into its promotional agenda. One such challenge, in fact the most momentous one, is in our view to open to the experimental practices tourist search for as a means of their own intellectual and political empowerment.

THE UNIVERCITY OF COIMBRA

The historical record reveals Coimbra as a city with over 2.000 years of history, being one of Portugal's oldest cities and the country's University City par excellence.

After the Christian Reconquest in 1064, the population gradually moved to the area around the old fortress wall, which divided the city into two different urban areas: the upper town (*Alta*) located inside the wall, was inhabited by the clergy, the nobility and few common people and the lower town (*Baixa*), situated outside the wall along the Mondego river, dominated by manufacturers and handicrafts.

As the country's first capital, from 1139 to 1256, Coimbra's profile developed as the result of the foundation of the University in 1290 by royal decree of King Dom Dinis, thus being one of Europe's most ancient universities.

The University was housed in the Fortress Palace (Paço da Alcáçova), on a hill overlooking the city, as a rather emblematic sign of power. Considered from the onset a rather prestigious institution, the University was the centre for the education of Portuguese elites soon involved in the colonial venture. It may be said that the University played a crucial role in the formation and consolidation of the Portuguese nation, helped consolidate the Portuguese language and was considered an important European centre for innovation and knowledge production. For many centuries the University of Coimbra remained the only university in the whole territory under Portuguese administration and *alma mater* of various generations of Brazilian and African elites.

In the 18th century as a result of Marquis of Pombal's enlightenment reform of the University, Coimbra reinforced its academic vocation. So much so that even today political and academic authorities share the conviction that the University and the city are so deeply intertwined that what is said of one reflects directly on the other (Gomes, 2008).

Notwithstanding, in political and cultural terms the city and the university have a long trajectory of clearly separated entities, continuously involved in disputes and conflicts. Long-lasting rivalries opposed on the one hand, the wealthy groups and cultural elites from the upper-town for whom the university is a prestigious self-identification sign and a symbol of power, and on the other hand, living downtown Coimbra, the lower social classes showing no identification whatsoever with the whole university power and imagery, and in fact abhorring it.

This city's social duality was somehow brought to a standstill by the country's democratization process of mid-1970s, which created the conditions to turn those socio-political rivalries into a sort of a cohesive atmosphere. Under the enthusiastic political ambience of democracy of the 80s and 90s, in a historically unprecedented move, the University and the City Hall were able to sit together in an attempt to define a common strategy for local development. The idea of a new city project was overwhelming and softened the old dualities. Some enthusiastic views did not hesitate to call this agreement a *UniverCity* project.

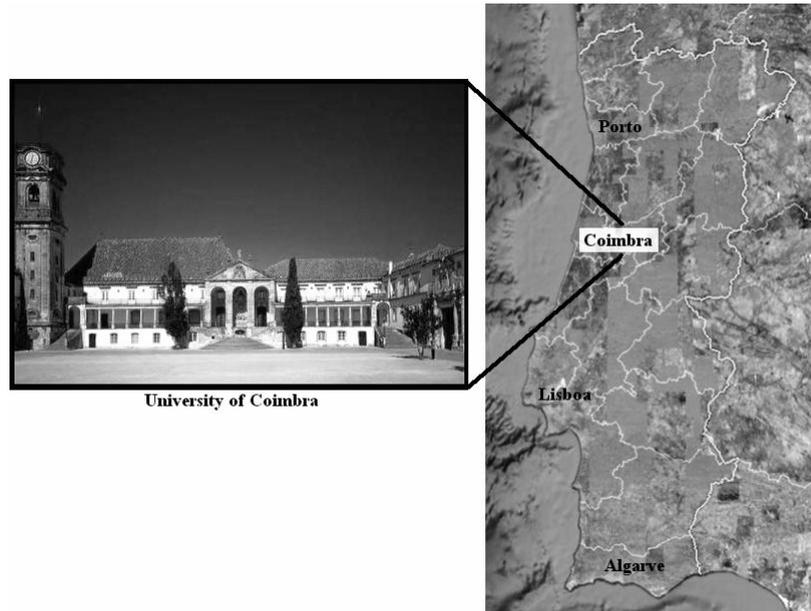
However fragile, such *UniverCity* project can be understood as a platform led by both the University and the City Hall, with the support of other local economic and political interests. Its rationale was based upon a more participative social action in which different actors – namely cultural elites and lower social classes – were to be direct participants in its design and by so doing committed actors of the city's economic and social renewal.

Tourism was seen, as in many other cities in Portugal and elsewhere, as the most apt and instrumental means to unleash a strategy of city renewal.

COIMBRA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

Coimbra is a city of about 148.000 dwellers. This medium sized city is located in the Central Region of Portugal, 120 km south of Porto and 200 km north of Lisbon, on the banks of Mondego River and not far (40 km) from the seaside city of Figueira da Foz. Coimbra is also surrounded by several picturesque mountain towns (Lousã and Penacova) and spa towns and villages (Luso, Buçaco and Curia).

Figure 1.



The local economic fabric accounts for about 23.000 enterprises in the municipality. Over 75% of these are tertiary ventures, with a rather small percentage of hotels and restaurants (9%) and a lodging capacity limited to just over 2.200 beds altogether which seems rather scarce for a city intending to really implement its tourist profile.

TABLE 1.
Tourism Activity Indicators for Coimbra

	2005	2006	2007
Hotels	9	9	9
Boarding houses	14	14	14
Other	1	1	1
Total	24	24	24
Lodging capacity	2 282	2 260	2 261
Nights	336 349	347 644	355 730
Guests	219 542	232 629	234 748
Average stay on the establishment	1,5	1,4	1,5
Guests according to country of usual residence			
N Portugal	110 881	109 660	110 408
Germany	7 232	8 311	7 887
Spain	29 222	32 441	31 831
France	9 394	9 576	10 867
Italy	16 153	23 143	21 854
The Netherlands	3 844	4 563	3 845
United Kingdom	4 163	4 174	3 039
United States of America	5 925	7 040	6 536
Total EU15	186 940	197 634	195 772
Total EU25	189 561	200 275	199 665
Grand Total	219 542	232 629	234 748
% Foreign guests	49,5	52,9	53
Nights between July-Sept.	29,9	32	32,7
Net Bed-occupation rate	x	42	43,1

Source: Statistics Portugal (2008, 2007a, 2006b)

The number of visitors and of nights spent on these facilities has been growing regularly, registering 234.748 guests in 2007. The average tourist stay in the city lasts for 1,5 nights to the dismay of local entrepreneurs, who regret the lack of a strategy to attract more visitors and sustain longer stays. Visitors are mainly of Portuguese origin (47%), followed by 13,6% from Spain, 9,3% from Italy and 4,6% from France.

Tourism in Coimbra is by and large structured around a sole attraction – the University – which is basically promoted and appreciated as a celebration of its rich cultural history of yesterday¹. In times when creative forms of tourism are experienced we believe that this is not enough for a successful strategy of tourism promotion. As Landry (2006) argues “a large formal and informal intellectual infrastructure and the old-fashioned, empire building tendencies of universities that are more like production factories does not always help”. In the case of Coimbra we would say that the intellectual history of the local University, however rich, must be combined with other forms of experiencing tourism today, as tourists are increasingly looking for opportunities to develop their creative potential through active participation in undergoing local activities (Richards & Wilson, 2007), that function as a training ground for personal growth and self-reflection (Landry, 2010).

In this sense the lively cultural and social atmosphere of this university town is being largely misused by the city tourist strategy. The same holds for a number of city spots likely to be brought into a sort of creative “Coimbra safari”.

This being said, let us however look at our 2008 six-language survey, aiming at identifying the overall recent trends in Coimbra’s historic centre. To this end, the survey was handed out personally to Coimbra visitors, at various locations: the University area, the focal point for distributing the questionnaire and where most data was gathered; and, complementary to this, at ‘Portugal dos Pequeninos’

¹ As a matter of fact political and intellectual heritage is the prevailing attribute underlying the ongoing bet to include the University within UNESCO’s World Heritage List. The University historical past goes permeates through all the other dimensions of the dossier presented to UNESCO (cultural, social, architectural, and so forth).

[Portugal for Toddlers] theme park, at the Memorial to Sister Lúcia, at the Municipal Camping Site, at the Coimbra Youth Hostel and at the reception desks of all the city hotels. A total of 951 valid responses was obtained.

Data gathered reveals a tourist profile of mostly young people (33.5% of tourists are aged between 21 and 30, 22.4% fall within the 31/40 age bracket, 20.7% are aged 41/50), highly educated (75% of visitors surveyed attended held a High Education degree). A mere 5.4% of survey respondents had had only basic or very basic schooling. For the most part (48.8%) visitors occupied Intellectual, Scientific or Technical Professions or were still students (13.4%).

Most of these visitors were travelling with friends (31.5%) or within childless families (29.1%), with the proportion of those travelling on package holidays being quite small (7.9%).

Tourists from Mediterranean and Central European countries accounted for the majority of visitors to Coimbra. Besides Portugal (where 17.5% of those surveyed live), highlight should go in descendent order to Italy (24.1%), France (17.9%) and Spain (17%). The fact is that there are very few tourists from outside Europe (7.7%), a factor which shows the limited attractiveness of Coimbra as a tourist destination as a whole.

Of the 951 survey respondents, 75.3% were first time visitors to Coimbra. On the other hand, among the 233 who had visited the city before, 49.5% returned for the pleasure of visiting Coimbra itself insofar as 45.5% do so to show the city to friends or relatives. A remnant percentage of 3% of respondents were involved in business.

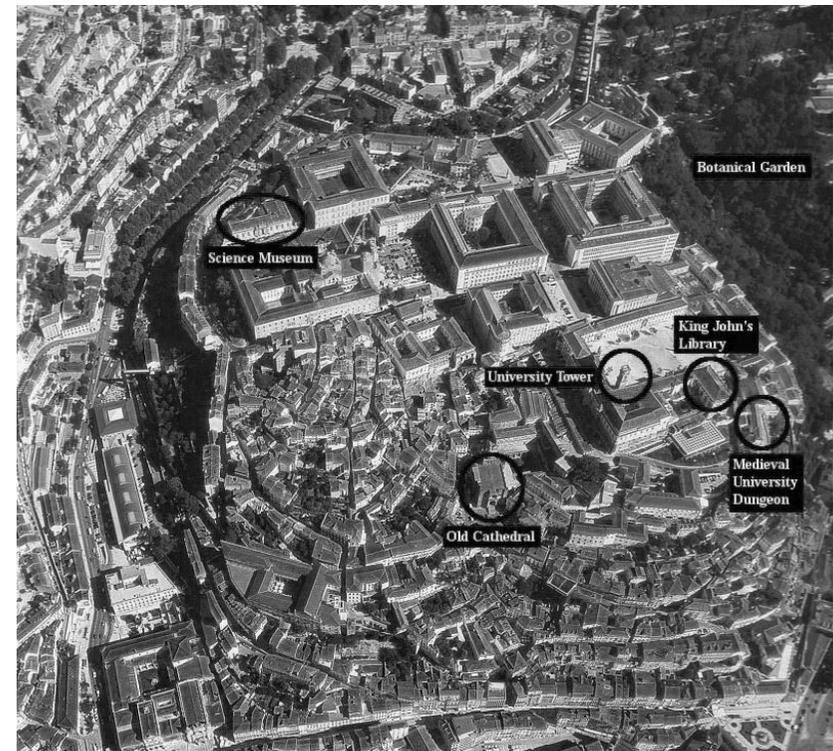
About half (51%) respondents had spent the night in Coimbra, with Italians, Spanish and the highly-educated visitors being those who stated they had done so. Short-stay appears to be the dominant pattern since 10.2% of tourists only spent 3 hours in Coimbra, 25.7% spent from 3 to 6 hours, and 39.7% spent from 6 hours to one day. Adding up these percentages, we figure that three quarters of visitors spend less than a day in Coimbra. This is a direct effect of a tourist venture too much centered on a unique attraction and, conversely, shows how an approximation to the logic of creative tourism may change this state of affairs and expand the tourists stay as they get in real city life.

Data is telling. Overall Coimbra holds a very modest place as a specific destination site for the majority of the city visitors. 72.7% of the survey respondents consider Coimbra a travel destination just like any other tourist local. Such lack of specificity appears also in the opinion of 18.6% of tourists who declare to be simply *en route* to other destinations. This is mainly the case of those passing by Coimbra in their way to either Lisboa (54%) or Porto (68.3%)

In turn, the relation between Coimbra's tourist flows and the surrounding region is of little relevance. Only 27.9% of visitors include de near-by seaside city of Figueira da Foz, in the same way that a mere 23.2% intended to visit the old- Roman ruins of Conimbriga and solely 18.1% would go for an eco-tourism experience at Luso/Buçaco national park. A small percentage of tourists visited or intended to visit the gastronomically famous region of Bairrada (7.3%), or the spa town of Cúria (3.9%), and mountainous city of Lousã (5.8%). Data impels us to notice how poor is the integrated tourism management on a regional basis where Coimbra's tourist flows remain isolated with no significant interaction with the various attractions close-by in a sounding waste of resources.

In the city, the University and 'Portugal dos Pequeninos' [Portugal for Toddlers] theme park are the most well-known tourist attractions followed by the Old Cathedral and the exquisite University Botanical Garden. Moreover, regarding historical monuments, the University in general (66.5%) remained the leading attraction, together with its King John's Library (57.4%).

Figure 2.



Data shows a clear concentration of the tourist experience on the University area, to the detriment of everything elsewhere in the city.

Such geographically concentrated experience around the University is openly assumed by professional tourist operators. Time and again, city promotional materials refer to Coimbra as an historic and university town:

Coimbra, a charming university town, where we breath in the atmosphere a mixture of students and the University itself.

(Coimbra tourist guide)

Coimbra, a lively city on the banks of the Mondego River [...] houses the oldest university (founded in 1290), from which have graduated the most illustrious names in the country's history.

(idem)

Other materials often introduce Coimbra in a sound bite fashion (Gomes, 2008) in which the city is portrayed as:

“The charming university town of Coimbra.”

“Coimbra, the historic university town.”

“Coimbra, celebrated for its beauty and ancient university.”

(Coimbra tourist pamphlets)

Nowadays, such a one-sided option for a historical asset and its intangible value sounds like an old-fashioned tourist marketing orientation inasmuch as it leaves aside the potential for renewal inherent to many aspects of city daily life along the lines of creative tourism.

Moreover, needless to say that such promotional strategy, insofar as it gives prominence to the university alone, deepens the old-times city duality and subverts the enthusiastic tourist plan contained in the *UniverCity* project.

CONCLUSION

To counteract this vision, we argue, it is necessary a new approach based on a different set of policies: technical and socio-political.

Regarding technical initiatives related to tourism, we consider that, firstly, hospitality infrastructures should be renewed and increased. This would include not only hotel accommodation but also a diversification of the city’s tourist routes (historical, literary, political, gastronomic etc.) to upgrade the quality of sites on offer.

Secondly, Coimbra has to reform the existing cultural assets such as arts, the theatre, dance, sports, etc., and include them in a renewed package committed with local cultural dynamics and tourism attractiveness at once.

Thirdly, the city needs to alter its overall strategy towards information and the media, negotiate with tourism operators the city’s

promotional contents and get multi-sided and more aggressive advertising policy directed towards the national and overseas markets.

Fourthly, there is a need to design a new tourist package able to integrate other sites of tourist interest in the region (i.e. sun and sand tourism, environmental and nature tours, mountain tourism, health and natural spa assets, religious tourism, monumental, medieval and archaeological sites) therefore diversifying the somehow traditional current tourist portfolio.

The implementation of these technical measures requires a different political agenda. It would involve cultivate a participative political and decision-making project, giving an opportunity to the local community to participate in the design of the new tourist Coimbra and making it a city project as a whole.

Inasmuch as sustainable urban tourism, to be sustainable, has to comply with local community interests at large. The ongoing tourism project of Coimbra fails and appears to be too much a top-down procedure, very much in the lines of the symbolic and figurative picture of the University on the top of the hill, looking down with conceit.

To sum up, Coimbra’s recent tourist experience has been largely based upon a sole historical resource – the 13th century local University. To a certain degree, it has been a story of success over the past 3 to 4 decades. Such strategy, however, appears to be exhausted. Firstly because it hardly can assure tourism as an effective means of urban renovation, to say nothing of its capacity to reinforce social cohesion. Secondly, because the new millennium requires the conception of a new tourist. From the consecrator detached figure, the new tourist will embody a committed relationship with the sites visited and the lives of those who reside and work there. This entails a new vision of tourism. From now on, cities must open themselves to the participation of “outsiders”, share their past and their present with strangers in a political renewed mood which promotes cultural approximation and, by the same token, unleashes a unique experience of mutual empowerment.

A last word for Coimbra and for the city’s absolute need to radically shift gears in the design of its tourist strategy for the future.

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