

*traits, and consequently, the Covent Garden market plays the role of its flagship building, relegating the Royal Opera House as a catalyst of social dynamics.*

## **CULTURAL FLAGSHIPS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF URBAN AREAS FOR TOURISM AND CULTURE: THE CASE OF COVENT GARDEN**

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### **KEYWORDS**

*Cultural flagships; Cultural quarters; Perception of place; Tourist experience; Urban identity.*

### **ABSTRACT**

*From the Sydney Opera House to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, cultural flagships have proved to have a deep impact on the perception of destinations as places for culture and the consequent development of urban cultural clusters. In London, the case of Covent Garden as an urban precinct for tourism and culture is of particular interest because of its rich heritage, a distinctive architectural form, a firm commercial sector and the provision of both high and popular forms of culture. Its vaulted piazza is crowned by the Royal Opera House, which was subjected to a £213m redevelopment programme aimed to implement its vision of access, excellence and artistic development; and to provide it with a fresh architectural front that could potentially be associated with the benefits mentioned above. These settings raise a number of questions regarding how Covent Garden is perceived and experienced by the visitor, considering that its flagship building is mostly devoted to the high arts, but the cultural supply around the area is as varied as the songs the street buskers perform in the piazza and the variety of commercial products that can be bought in the market. The adoption of a social constructivist approach throughout a series of on site semi structured interviews with domestic and international tourists has revealed that the area's commercial pull factor overshadows that of its cultural*

## INTRODUCTION

The understanding of urban areas for tourism and culture is a matter of high complexity due to the many elements that intervene in the phenomenon of place making and the many debates that focusing on one or the other generates. Covent Garden as an important part of London's tourist portfolio is a typical example of this. Its urban development occurred organically throughout history resulting in a firmly established urban precinct with a very ample scope of tourism supply that ranges from the high arts to popular culture, the clustering of theatres, a firm commercial sector and a distinctive architectural form. In order to understand the tourist flows in this area, it is important to scrutinize the experiential and perceptual processes that occur within the tourist, and how they assign meanings to the urban settings that they visit considering the diversity of elements that can influence their perception and experience of the area. Adding yet another layer of complexity to this case study, the recently redeveloped Royal Opera House is firmly established at the core of Covent Garden. This building, which stands as a world renowned provider of high culture and arts has a rich history and heritage of its own, but it can be asserted that it has evolved over time parallel to the area, to the extent that Covent Garden's name is often used indistinctively to refer to either the area or the flagship. Having being identified as 'the world's most inadequate of all grand opera houses of the world' (Powell, 1999 as quoted by BBC, 1999); all proposals to relocate it from the Covent Garden site were rejected to implement a highly controversial £213m redevelopment plan that nearly led to the Institutions bankruptcy. However, it aided in the implementation of its vision of representing excellence, access and artistic development, and to provide it with a fresh architectural front whose influence on the tourist's image of the area requires evaluation. This raises many questions regarding the role that an old cultural flagship made new through redevelopment schemes plays in the firmly established tourism precinct's sense of place and draw towards the cultural tourist. Academic research concerning cultural flagships and their impact on cultural tourism seems to mainly focus on the development of new urban areas and novel flagships by the likes of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Plaza, 2000) and the Westergasfabriek in Amster-

dam (Mommaas, 2004). Nevertheless, London's rich heritage and history requires research that focuses on the long established tourism precinct to understand its success as a tourism destination. For this purpose, this work focuses on the Covent Garden's visitor perception and experience of the area and the influence that the Royal Opera House may exert, taking into consideration the theoretical dimensions of the cultural tourist, the urban precinct and the cultural flagship.

## CULTURAL TOURISM AND THE CULTURAL TOURIST

Richardson and Fluker (2004:76) indicate that cultural tourism is the result of the tourist's desire to 'experience, understand and appreciate the character of a place, its richness and diversity'. Hence, London's status as a world class tourism destination can be related to its very ample scope of cultural supply. To understand the elements that intervene in the phenomenon of cultural tourism, Boniface (1995) proposes that cultural tourism is the result of the dynamics between the 'users' comprising groups of cultural tourists with different needs and motivations; 'presenters', who the author (p. 28) defines as "the person or persons immediately involved in making a cultural provision for the visitor"; and third, the 'item' conceptualised as the attraction itself. For this research, the user corresponds to the Covent Garden's cultural tourist; the presenter is the area of Covent Garden aided by the Royal Opera House as the cultural flagship that is used as a case study, and the item, culture itself.

McKercher and DuCross (2002) analyse the cultural tourist according to their level of motivation and depth of experience. They indicate that they can have high, medium or low cultural motivation but their visit to a particular site can result in deep or shallow experiences regardless of the former. It is interesting to note, however, that the notion of 'depth of experience' lacks a clear and concise conceptualisation in existing literature. Timothy (1998) affirms that this issue is related to the tourists' level of connectivity to a site which somewhat opposes the notion of cultural distance (as indicated by McKercher, 2002). In this respect, McIntosh and Goeldner (1990) (as cited by

McKercher, 2002:36), indicate that 'visitors from more culturally distant regions tend to seek deeper experiences, whereas those cultural tourists from culturally proximate regions seek a more entertainment orientated experience'. This thesis can be debatable and is prone to testing according to the tourist's perception and experience of this particular case study, which is how this contributes to the understanding of cultural tourism.

Regarding the experience of the cultural tourist, Hayllar et al. (2008) refer to Kelly's (1955) 'personal construct theory', which indicates that every experience is pre conceived by the individual according to a personalized set of influences that create a sense of expectation within the tourist. This will affect the tourist's motivations to visit a tourism precinct and the nature of their perceptions and experiences of place. This theory is fundamental for the adoption of a social constructivist methodological approach as will be addressed in further sections. Graefke and Vaske (1987) indicate that a tourist experience can be influenced by 'individual, environmental, situational and personality related factors as well as the degree of communication with other people' (as cited in Ryan, 2002:119). Hence, there are several factors to consider in order to understand the nature of these experiences and this work will contribute on this academic debate by focusing on the cultural tourist in the well established urban precinct.

## URBAN AREAS FOR TOURISM AND CULTURE

The many different angles by which an urban area for tourism and culture can be analysed add many layers of complexity to the understanding of this matter. Existing literature confirms the debate between many different points of view that focus on different elements of the place making system of an area.

From a tourism point of view, Judd (2003) proposes the notion of the tourist bubble, which indicates that these areas can be understood as 'virtual tourist reservations'. This entails that the entertainment centres, services and facilities available are clearly intended for a tourist public and do not reflect the poverty, crime levels and other negative aspects of the quality of life in other areas of the destination. This

also relates to the concept of a gentrification centre (Smith, 1996), which is the result of a series of efforts that benefit derelict areas where a so called invasion of tourists and/or middle and upper classes bring with them economic trade that result in regeneration. In the case of Covent Garden, its local population fiercely resisted several redevelopment schemes that aimed to regenerate the area by demolishing buildings and altering its street patterns, putting at stake its historical authenticity (Anson, 1981). Regarding the area's existing leisure facilities developed for the tourist, Eisinger (2000:319) indicates that in such entertainment districts, the rate and assortment of developments is increased, the economic and demographic characteristics of the area change, the target audience shifts from the area's local residents to its visitors and the scale of entertainment developments is greater.

It is also important to take into consideration the visual components and the morphology of an area to understand its appeal to the tourist. Aldous (1992) conceptualises an urban village as 'urban areas in which a mixture of uses and human-scale architecture full of incident and variety produce places that people instinctively warm to and enjoy using'. The author states that its sense of place is based on the mixture of visual and psychological assets, which relates to Covent Garden as this area is characterised by its wide array of land use that ranges from commerce to the provision of high and popular culture and eating and drinking services. Furthermore, it is highly pedestrianised and has a strong local population, all of which respond to the characteristics proposed by this model.

From a cultural point of view, Mommaas' (2004) cultural cluster, Roodhouse's (2006) cultural quarter and Landry's (2000) creative milieu all identify geographical areas where the clustering of buildings, institutions and individuals contributing to the area's cultural vibrancy affect its economic, spatial and social dynamics. Mommaas (2004) states that they come as a result of the quest of fostering the identity of the place, establishing an attraction's pull power and positioning the area firmly in the tourism market. They often have a cultural flagship at their core, as in the case of the Royal Opera House, but the area as a whole has 23 working theatres supplying musicals, ballet, opera and plays to its visitors; which combined with the trans-

port museum foster a strong cultural identity to the area as a place for performance and culture.

## CULTURAL FLAGSHIPS

As indicated by Mommaas (2004), urban areas for tourism and culture very often are based around a major flagship development, such as museums in the case of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, or large theatres for the performing arts by the likes of the Sydney Opera House, creating cultural clusters and creative milieus. Wing Tai Wai (2004:245) recognises the significance of these developments by stating that ‘as cities strive for globality, flagship developments play indispensable roles by signalling messages of economic development and cultural vibrancy’. In the case of flagships for the performing arts, Mulryne and Shewring (1995) identify three major considerations: First, the hard infrastructure, implying the physical appearance, geographical location and other physical aspects are defined to establish a successful theatre. Secondly, there are the social dynamics that the use of urban space for the performing arts creates. Not only between patrons among themselves and the inner experience of a theatre visit within the building asides from attending a performance; but also involving the wider community and its reaction to the facility developed. And thirdly, quality in its artistic product. Adding to the understanding of how a flagship for the performing arts can influence its surroundings, Hofseth’s (2008:103) affirms that ‘An analysis of the media coverage suggests that culture can be used as a lever for city development – not necessarily because of the inherent qualities of culture and art as such, but because of the role they can play by being coupled to other elements of urban development’. Therefore, evidence indicates that artistic performance and creativity could be handled not entirely isolated but relatively independently from the urban benefits that cultural flagships can provide. This research will contribute to this debate by unveiling new knowledge on how a flagship that is world renowned for the quality of its artistic product influences its urban settings in the view of the visitor.

## METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This work aims towards the discovery of how the Covent Garden’s visitor interprets, assigns meanings, perceives and experiences this urban precinct. It concerns people’s experience and perception of place, which is the starting point for the adoption of a research paradigm. Lengkeek (2001:178) affirms that ‘Individuals experience reality only through the filter of their ability to know and judge’. The author suggests that the sensorial sphere by which the individual perceives its environment, the interaction between this outer stimulus with inner values and concepts, and the process by which such interaction leads to interpretation are the elements that intervene in the process of meaning assignment. It is because the range of values that interact with the outer environment vary greatly between individuals that a positivist approach is not feasible to conduct this research. And according to Lengkeek’s (2001) proposition, it can be implied that a focus on the individual is necessary to answer the research questions in a truthful manner. Quinn Patton (2002:132) questions: ‘how have the people in this setting have constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, ‘truths’, explanations, beliefs, and worldview?’. The author associates these queries with the constructivist perspective and provides a set of criteria for adopting such a position. In the case of constructivism, such a criteria would be the facts that the subjective nature of the research is acknowledged, that the data obtained will be trustworthy and authentic, that praxis and reflexivity provide a frame to ‘understand how one’s own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world’ (p.546), it contemplates the singularity of each research subject enquired and it provides improved and elaborate knowledge on the research topic. This framework coupled with individual semi structured interviews with on site visitors as a method; confirm the suitability of adopting social constructivism as the philosophical perspective for this research.

## METHOD

The chosen method is on site semi structured interviews and both international and domestic tourists are taken as research subjects, which will reveal findings regarding McKercher's (2002) thesis regarding cultural distance. Marshall and Rossman (2006:101) quote Kahn and Cannell (1957) to conceptualise in depth interviews as 'a conversation with a purpose'. The authors indicate that there is an informal sphere about interviews that facilitate thorough enquiry. They also stress the emic perspective of interviewing that allows the subject to develop their views according to their own interpretation of the topic, which is precisely the scenario that this investigation aims for. Nevertheless, the authors also indicate that it is the researchers' challenge to keep the interviewing process casual, formal and comfortable but within a theoretical framework and conceptual grounds. Robson (2002:271) also addresses the instances where semi structured in depth interviews are a suitable method for qualitative research and indicates that it is appropriate 'where a study focuses on the meaning of particular phenomena of the participants, where individual perceptions of processes within a social unit are to be studied prospectively, where individual historical accounts are required of how a particular phenomenon developed and where exploratory work is required before a quantitative study can be carried out'. These four instances can be directly related to the nature of the present research because cultural tourism in Covent Garden intends to be explored in both its experiential and perceptual spheres, being the cultural tourists themselves the sources of information.

## FINDINGS

230 on site interviews have been conducted with both international and domestic tourists, which have unveiled new knowledge regarding the matter of cultural distance in this particular case study. In order to ensure representation, a wide variety of visitors have been interviewed, from different age groups and countries of origin and in different locations, resulting in an understanding of their perception and experience of the area, their motivation to visit and the significance of the flagship according to their view.

## MOTIVATION TO VISIT

Most tourists interviewed expressed that they visit London to do the typical "sightseeing", "site visiting" and "touristy things". Their impressions of the city seem to be centred on its heritage primarily, its multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan status. Covent Garden attracts tourists visiting the main stream tourist areas of London and a remarkable number of them where expecting to find an actual botanical garden. When asked about why they decided to visit the area, many interviewees indicate that "it was on the guide" or that it was recommended by previous visitors. Few of them seem to have a specific objective for their visit, which relates to McKercher's (2002) thesis regarding the incidental, casual or serendipitous tourist because of their low cultural motivations. Their expectations vary greatly from one tourist to another, but it is interesting to note that the cultural impact that the 1964 film "My Fair Lady" had on the world's perception of the area still prevails.

## THE TOURIST'S PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE AREA

The results indicate an overwhelming inclination towards commerce. In this respect, Covent Garden Market appears to take the place of the area's flagship, not only because of its distinctive architectural form but also because it is the epitome of the area from a commercial point of view. Many tourists indicate that they perceive Covent Garden to be "quieter" and "more relaxed" than the adjoining Soho or Mayfair areas of London. When describing their experience, the verbs "strolling" and "wandering" are common themes. They seem to be profoundly influenced by the presence of street buskers, with many of them indicating that it is what they will remember the most. However, there seems to exist two very different Covent Gardens: the mainstream area, the piazza, where all the street busking takes place, where the Royal Opera House, the market and St Paul's church are located. This is where the organic flow of tourists takes place. But also, the peripheral areas such as Seven Dials, Kingsway or Maiden Lane appear to attract a very different set of tourists. Seven Dials for example, due to its proximity to the popular Neal's Yard, has a

stronger appeal for the shopping tourist. Many of the interviewees approached in peripheral locations indicate that they do not enjoy the vibrant nature of the piazza and feel more at ease in quieter, narrow streets. They describe the area as “cosy” and “more intimate”. Pedestrianisation also plays a crucial role in their perception of the area. The scarce presence of vehicles on the streets allows them to stroll freely and safely. This indicates that Aldous’ (1992) model of the urban village seems to be the most suitable for this particular case study. Another dimension of the bilateral nature of Covent Garden is the one related to time of visit. During the morning and afternoon hours, the area appeals to families and shoppers, whilst during the evening, the family orientated tourist is replaced by the drinking tourist, the diner tourist and the theatre going tourist.

### **INFLUENCE OF THE FLAGSHIP**

It is concerning this issue that McKercher’s (2002) thesis regarding cultural distance was made evident, with results indicating that the phenomenon occurs conversely to what the author affirms. In this particular case, the Royal Opera House has a much stronger appeal to domestic tourists, all of which know very well about the Institution and regard it as an important element of the area. A sense of local pride has been clearly identified amongst domestic tourists, many of which have never attended a performance there but still speak richly and soundly about it. On the other hand, international tourists don’t have as much of an opinion as the former. In some cases, when interviewed just outside the House, they fail to identify the building. Few of them indicate that they have never heard of the place, with many indicating that they have heard from it but don’t know much about it. When asked where they have gathered this knowledge, a common response is “I don’t know, it’s just a household name”. The interviewees express that they would expect the theatre to be very “grand”, “majestic” and indeed “Royal”. They give examples like the Sydney Opera House or the Palais Garnier in Paris to illustrate their expectations. When asked about what they think of the current building, they describe it as “subtle”, “hidden” or “concealed”. Nevertheless, they do not dismiss the importance of the Institution for the area, with many of them indicating that its significance lies within its name

instead of its physical appearance. Interviewees have the perception that it is a very “posh” place not meant for tourists, and they are unaware of its free daytime openings, exhibitions, eating facilities open to the general public and free recitals. Despite these comments, many of them indicate that it is an essential element of the area, because it attracts a different set of visitor that contrasts with the rest, contributing to the area’s diversity of visitors. Hence, its influence is about its social dynamics rather than its architectural front.

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher witnessed flows of thousands of tourists visiting Covent Garden; eating, drinking, shopping, taking pictures, laughing at street buskers’ performance, visiting St Paul’s church, relaxing in its garden and undertaking many other activities that confirm the wide array of supply for tourism in this area and its success at attracting tourists. Yet it was interesting to note that during the interviews, they do not seem to have a strong sense of where they are, why they have decided to visit, how their visit affects their perception of London or a general awareness of the area’s rich heritage or tradition in terms of the built environment and the performing arts. This can be associated with McKercher’s (2002) incidental tourist experiences that result from a low level of motivation along with a shallow depth of experience. Nevertheless, the notion of depth of experience is still a debatable and controversial matter. The question of what determines a deep cultural experience in Covent Garden remains completely subject to the individual’s inner values of interpretation, which acquires an even greater level of complexity considering the wide ranging elements that intervene in the tourist’s experience of this particular area. Could it be that a deep experience should consist in a comprehensive understanding of the fact that some of the world’s greatest figures of the high arts have performed at the Royal Opera House? Or that the building itself, first established in 1732, burned to ashes twice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that Queen Victoria could be seen in the Royal Box up to three times per week? These detailed facts that speak of the strong heritage and tradition of both the flagship and the area may be of paramount importance to the individual that has a strong affinity with the high arts. To

those who have an appropriate level of Timothy's (1998) 'connectivity' to the site. But the present work has revealed that they mean little to nothing to the average Covent Garden's tourist, and that its commercial offer along with its pedestrianised, narrow streets comprises the identity of the area. In this sense, the Covent Garden's visitor has a higher level of connectivity with retail. And, as Aldous (1992) proposes, 'enjoys using' because of its resemblance to an urban village away from the rush and sounds that often dominate the central areas of large cities like London. Hence, despite the clustering of theatres and the presence of a large cultural flagship for the performing arts, Mommaas' (2004), Roodhouse's (2006) and Landry's (2000) theories about the role of culture in similar urban precincts are overshadowed by those models that focus on urban form and tourist related elements.

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