

BRIDGING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY GAP: A CASE FOR UNITING TOURISM AND URBAN PLANNING FOR A CONSISTENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE “URBAN TOURIST BUBBLE”

Holly E. Bosley, M.S.
North Carolina State University
Department of Parks Recreation
and Tourism Management
Raleigh, NC 27695-8004
hebosley@ncsu.edu

Gene L. Brothers, Ph.D.
North Carolina State University

Abstract.—Both tourism researchers and urban planners use the term “tourist bubble” to describe a geographic area in a destination within which visitors operate. However, there is an interdisciplinary disparity in the conceptualization of the tourist bubble. This paper aims to more clearly describe the intersection of tourism and urban planning research, as well as to illuminate semantic similarities and differences between the two disciplines. A new methodology was developed for identifying and mapping the urban tourist bubble through structured interviews with individuals representing the tourism and urban planning professions. Understanding the urban tourist bubble is important because individuals representing both of these professions influence policy decisions that affect the urban experience of visitors as well as residents.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the influential urban planning book, *The Tourist City*, Judd and Fainstein (1999) acknowledged the role of tourism in shaping the spatial form of cities. Urban tourism activity can be either integrated into the urban fabric or confined to distinct urban tourist zones. These geographic areas, which are planned and managed for tourists, have been described by such terms as “tourist bubbles” (Judd and Fainstein 1999), “tourist districts” (Pearce 1998), and “urban tourism

precincts” (Hayllar et al. 2008). Research on tourist zones appears in the literature of two distinct fields of study, tourism and urban planning, neither of which has measured the spatiality of tourism behavior in an urban context. Despite similarities in semantics, tourism and urban planning scholars have not collaborated much. In professional practice as well, there is little overlap between tourism professionals, whose primary responsibility is promoting the place, and urban planners, who often focus on developing the place product.

This paper defines the construct of the tourist bubble, compares the applications of this construct in tourism and urban planning literature, describes a new technique for measuring the tourist bubble in an urban context, and addresses opportunities for research on the urban tourist bubble.

2.0 DEFINING THE TOURIST BUBBLE

In tourism and urban planning literature, the tourist bubble has several consistent characteristics. The bubble comprises a concentrated geographic area of tourist-oriented facilities and attractions, which is separated from its surrounding environment by spatially or psychologically created boundaries. The classic example of a spatial boundary is a cruise ship, but spatial boundaries exist on land as well—for instance, a gated resort complex such as Club Med or Sandals. Psychological boundaries are created by cautionary messages directed toward those tourists who express interest in venturing beyond the tourist bubble. Some of the psychological boundaries are put in place by the operators as a means to keep profit from seeping out of the bubble. Others are created to prevent visitors from venturing into unsafe areas.

Within the bubble, tourists have limited interaction with local residents, since the boundaries serve to keep tourists in and residents out. In some cases,

residents are prohibited from entering the tourist bubble, as documented by Carrier and Macleod (2005) in their paper on a resort in the Dominican Republic. Additionally, since the facilities within a tourist bubble are oriented toward tourists, local residents may find little reason to spend time inside the bubble.

The first appearance of the word “bubble” in the tourism literature was in Cohen’s (1972) seminal piece on tourist typologies. In the context of mass tourism, Cohen described the “environmental bubble” as a familiar, comfortable microenvironment within a novel, foreign macroenvironment. Cohen’s environmental bubble was based on Boorstin’s (1961) early work on images and the “pseudo-event,” which is planned and lacks spontaneity. Weaver (2005) defined environmental bubbles as “enclosed spaces that shield tourists from potentially unpleasant experiences...[and that are] operated for the exclusive use of tourists” (p. 169). In these as well as other applications of the environmental bubble, the key characteristic is *familiarity*. Examples of environmental bubbles include resort complexes, theme parks, tour buses, and cruise ships.

2.1 Applications of the Tourist Bubble in the Tourism Literature

The term *tourist bubble* was derived from this conceptualization of an “environmental bubble.” Early references to a “bubble” in the context of tourism appeared in two chapters of the seminal anthology, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Graburn 1989, Smith 1977). Describing the bubble from the perspective of the tourist experience, Smith (1977) explained this experience as “being physically ‘in’ a foreign culture while socially ‘outside’ the culture” (p. 6).

Graburn (1989) described a hierarchy of prestige for travel experiences, with distant, exotic, or rugged travel being more prestigious than safe, package travel. Graburn emphasized the importance of familiarity to tourists who elect this second type of “lower-status” travel experience, described as “the tourism of the

timid,” for tourists who “carry the home-grown ‘bubble’ of their lifestyle around with them” (p. 35). Graburn noted that these tourists “worship ‘plumbing that works’ and ‘safe’ water and food” (p. 35).

After these early references in *Hosts and Guests*, applications of the tourist bubble in the tourism literature were absent until the present decade, when Jacobsen (2003) examined the relevance of the tourist bubble in the context of inter-European travel. Jacobsen defined the tourist bubble as “a territorial and functional differentiation and an expectation of [European] holidaymakers going abroad” (p. 71). The primary expectation of these tourists was a sense of familiarity in terms of food, lodging, and language.

Jaakson (2004) developed a method for measuring the tourist bubble in a Mexican cruise ship port-of-call, but applications of this technique are limited to destinations with predictable tourist flows. Carrier and Macleod (2005) applied the tourist bubble to an all-inclusive resort in the Dominican Republic. This bubble was spatial; tourists could visit local villages, but local residents were not permitted on the resort property. The authors also described a psychological tourist bubble where supposed “eco-tourists” were unaware of the measures that had been taken to create their resort—namely, that the construction of the resort displaced an entire village and kept local residents from reaching the beach.

Other concepts that are similar to the tourist bubble are: tourist districts (Pearce 1998), tourism precincts (Hayllar et al. 2008), tourism enclaves (Davis and Morais 2004, Edensor 1998, Freitag 1994), spaces of containment (Weaver 2005), and total institutions (Weaver 2005), a sociological term coined by Goffman (1961) to describe environments where the behavior of individuals is manipulated or constrained. The last two terms have been applied to cruise ships, which, according to Weaver, are built for the purpose of revenue containment. Cruise ship passengers are provided with everything they need so that all of their money is spent onboard.

Most examples of the tourist bubble in the tourism literature pertain to resorts, cruise ships, and cruise ship ports-of-call. Some tourism scholars have addressed the spatial composition of urban environments, such as Pearce's (1998) analysis of Paris' tourist districts. These conceptualizations of urban tourist spaces, however, do not include defining such traits of the tourist bubble as familiarity and low levels of interaction between tourists and residents. Examples of urban tourist bubbles include Baltimore's Inner Harbor and the Las Vegas Strip.

2.2 Applications of the Tourist Bubble in the Urban Planning Literature

Judd (1999) introduced the tourist bubble to the urban planning literature in *The Tourist City*. In this and other urban planning texts, the treatment of the urban tourist bubble was purely descriptive, focusing on the construction of the urban tourist bubble as a strategy for urban revitalization. Frieden and Sagalyn (1989) used the term "mayor's 'trophy collection'" (p. 259) to describe the checklist-style ensemble of attractions that cities amass to increase their attractiveness to visitors and (current and potential) residents. Judd (1999) related this "trophy collection" to the development of the urban tourist bubble, noting that urban tourist bubbles are standardized and contain identical attractive components, including a convention center, atrium hotel, shopping mall, new office towers, and restored historic neighborhoods. As a result of suburbanization and deindustrialization, cities were in need of alternate economic development strategies. Many turned to tourism, hoping to construct the ideal product mix to attract conventions, meetings, and leisure travelers to the urban core.

The result of this formulaic urban development can be what Harvey (1989) termed a "zero-sum" game. When every city has the same "trophy collection" of attributes, cities lose their ability to position themselves effectively and uniquely against other urban destinations, creating difficulties for tourism professionals who are charged with the task of positioning the city as a distinctive place. In addition, the urban tourism experience is devalued, since visitors to these big-box tourist spaces often have a

sense that they are in "Anywhere, U.S.A.," rather than a unique destination. Allowing visitors to venture outside the bubble or enabling elements of a destination's unique culture to seep in may facilitate differentiation. Interestingly, however, there is scant discussion of differentiation strategies in the urban planning literature on the urban tourist bubble.

Similar to the conceptualization of the tourist bubble in the tourism literature, urban planners' conceptualization of the urban tourist bubble also provides a sense of familiarity to tourists. Judd (1999) compared the urban tourist bubble to a theme park, which provides "entertainment and excitement, with reassuringly clean surroundings" (p. 39). In fact, themed spaces, such as shopping malls and festival marketplaces, are characteristic of the urban tourist bubble.

3.0 NEW METHODOLOGY FOR MAPPING THE TOURIST BUBBLE

While both tourism and urban planning professions have addressed the construct of the urban tourist bubble, they have not collaborated to come to a better understanding of the concept. Currently, urban planners view the tourist bubble in terms of its structural components, while tourism researchers focus on visitor behavior within and around the tourist bubble. Understanding the urban tourist bubble is important because individuals representing both of these professions influence policy decisions that affect the urban experiences of visitors as well as residents.

In fact, the study of *urban* tourism in general has been overlooked by both tourism scholars and urban planning researchers. Ashworth (2003) describes the absence of urban tourism research as a "double neglect," whereby "those studying tourism neglected cities while those studying cities neglected tourism" (p. 143). Much of the existing urban tourism research is case study research, which has been criticized for its inability to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of the urban tourism phenomenon (Page 1999). As recently as 2004, Selby commented that "urban tourism has been severely neglected as an

area of academic research” (p. 31). The urban tourist bubble is a topic that is addressed by both fields of study and, therefore, provides an opportunity for interdisciplinary research.

Our recent study resulted in the development of a new methodology for mapping the tourist bubble. Data on perceptions of an urban tourist bubble, defined as a distinct geographic area planned and managed for tourists, were collected from tourism professionals and urban planning professionals to assess the differences between these two areas of research and practice. This study proposed a new methodology for mapping the urban tourist bubble based on respondents’ perceptions of the most-visited tourist attractions in downtown Raleigh, NC, as well as perceptions of the perimeter of downtown. This new measurement technique advances the literatures of both the tourism and urban planning fields and highlights the similarities and differences between tourism and urban planning professionals. Downtown Raleigh was chosen as the study site because it is undergoing significant urban revitalization efforts, including the construction of a new convention center, which opened in Fall 2008. Structured personal interviews were conducted with tourism professionals and urban planners to better understand these two stakeholder groups’ perceptions of the urban tourist bubble in downtown Raleigh.

Overall, 68 interviews were conducted, each lasting 10 to 20 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of three sections. The first section included background questions about employment experience and place of residence. The second section asked respondents about their perceptions of the most-visited attractions, places, restaurants, and accommodations in downtown Raleigh. The final section was a checklist task. It listed 21 well known places, selected because of their location near the perimeter of downtown Raleigh’s business improvement district. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered each place on the list to be in downtown Raleigh by responding with “yes,” “no,” “maybe,” or “I don’t know.” In

general, the urban planning professionals were more likely to adhere to the downtown Raleigh business improvement district boundaries when deciding whether a place was considered to be downtown. A geographic information system was used to map the data. These maps delineate similarities and differences between the two professional groups’ perceptions of the urban tourist bubble. In general, maps can serve as a *lingua franca* to effectively communicate research findings across professions and disciplines, thus avoiding one of the major pitfalls of interdisciplinary research.

4.0 RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

This research is a first step in bridging the gap between the tourism and urban planning professions, in terms of developing a more comprehensive understanding of downtown Raleigh’s urban tourist bubble. Several research opportunities have been identified along the way. First, the technique could be replicated in other destinations to identify perceived boundaries of “town squares” and the downtowns of small cities. Comparing the perceptions of two urban development stakeholder groups would have implications for local government policy and future development plans.

In addition, the technique could be validated by comparing results to actual visitor traffic patterns in Raleigh, using data collected from mobile telephone tracking technology (McKercher and Lau 2007) or radio frequency identification (Oztaysi et al. 2007). McKercher and Lau, however, discovered that visitors were reluctant to accept such devices. Therefore, more research is needed to determine the best practices for persuading visitors to accept high-tech devices for data collection purposes.

Finally, it would be valuable to both the tourism and urban planning professions to understand visitors’ perceptions of a destination’s urban tourist bubble, perhaps through intercept surveys targeting urban tourists.

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