

MAPPING URBAN TOURIST EXPERIENCE ZONES IN DOWNTOWN RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

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Abstract.—A spatial analysis of tourism resources in a community can reveal relationships among places of interest that may otherwise be obscured by predetermined geographic boundaries. As part of a larger study on the spatial characteristics of an urban tourist destination, data were collected from tourism and urban planning professionals regarding their perceptions of the most-visited tourist attractions in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina. Data were mapped using ArcView software. These maps were compared to an existing map of downtown Raleigh's business improvement district (BID). Findings from this study revealed an interconnected set of tourist experience zones, defined by the associations among their contents, instead of a BID with artificial parameters. This new conceptual framework offers a more functional perspective of downtown, rather than one that is artificial or prefabricated.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Both urban planners and tourism professionals have a stake in the development of a city as an attractive destination for local residents as well as tourists. Urban planners aim to maximize the quality of life for local residents, while tourism professionals aim to maximize the experience for visitors. Both professions, however, are concerned with the built, natural, and cultural features that give a city its unique sense of place (Hinch 1996). Selby (2004) noted that, "an attractive place to visit tends to be an attractive place to live and work. Tourism has therefore become an important component of urban economic development" (p. 10).

At the same time, developing a city as an attractive place to live and work can also result in increased tourism.

Urban planners are responsible for the infrastructural components of the city, including tourism facilities, while tourism professionals must work with these built resources to create and promote a unique image for their city. Once each profession understands that their work affects the other, tourism professionals and urban planners can work together to shape downtown spaces into livable cities that are also amenable to tourism.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a spatial analysis of the data collected from urban planners and tourism professionals on their perceptions of the most-visited attractions and places, lodging properties, and restaurants in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on urban tourism is relevant to both tourism researchers and urban planners but has sometimes been neglected by researchers in both areas of study. Ashworth (1989) described the dearth of urban tourism research as a "double neglect... whereby... those interested in the study of tourism have tended to neglect the urban context in which much of it is set, while those interested in urban studies... have been equally neglectful of the importance of the tourist function of cities" (p. 33). From the time of Ashworth's commentary until the completion of the present study, urban tourism research has been slow to evolve compared to other areas of tourism research over the same time period.

Ashworth (2003) also noted that while tourism depends on cities, cities do not need tourism. Though not essential for a city's economic survival, tourism can make positive contributions to a city's economy

by, for example, attracting businesses and broadening the tax base. Tourism facilities and tourist activity also create an energetic environment that is vital for the creation of a livable city.

Despite the connection between tourism and economic development, urban economic development strategies do not always include tourism development or promotion in their plans. When tourism development and promotion are not pursued, a common strategy for downtown improvement has been to establish a business improvement district (BID). Friesecke (2006) defined a BID as: “a geographically and mostly inner city area by which the property and business owners cooperate to improve the business and urban environment. The BID services provided are supplementary to those provided by the municipality and usually include security, maintenance of public spaces, removal of litter and graffiti, economic development, public parking improvements, special events and social services” (p. 2). Houstoun (1997) noted that “many state laws require a map indicating which properties will be assessed and served by the BID” (p. 25), thus justifying the geographic component in Friesecke’s definition.

The BID concept originated in Toronto, Canada, with the designation of the Bloor West Village Business Improvement Area (BIA) in 1970. The BIA developed in response to the completion of the Bloor-Danforth subway line, when “many shoppers who formerly traveled along the surface [i.e., at street level] on Bloor Street in streetcars began disappearing underground” (Bloor West Village BIA 2005). Today, BIDs play an important role in downtown revitalization in cities, large and small, around the world. Many American cities, including Baltimore, Maryland, Cleveland, Ohio, and Raleigh, North Carolina have established BIDs to improve their downtown areas.

A common urban development strategy is to design a standardized urban center with amenities that mimic those of other cities. Frieden and Sagalyn (1989) used the term “trophy collection” to describe the checklist-style ensemble of attractions that cities

amass to increase their attractiveness to visitors and residents as a “civic agenda...and a trophy collection that mayors want” (p. 259). 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 such as a convention center, atrium hotel, shopping mall, and restored historic neighborhood. The result of formulaic urban development can be what Harvey (1989) termed a “zero-sum” game, whereby cities become more alike and have no features to differentiate them from competitor destinations.

Therefore, to attract visitors, cities need to “develop something either distinctive or specialized...based on something inherent in the place and its history, or a theme which has been identified” (Law 1993, p. 170). This recommendation relates to the marketing concept of positioning: the differentiation of a destination from its competitors so that it occupies a distinctive place relative to other destinations in the minds of potential visitors (Ries and Trout 1986). Differentiation can be a struggle for cities that have adhered to a standardized downtown revitalization strategy.

3.0 METHODS

3.1 Study Site

This study was conducted in Raleigh, North Carolina, the state’s capital with a population of 350,000. The greater Raleigh area receives 11.5 million visitors annually (GRCVB 2007a) and about 3.5 million of them (30 percent) visit downtown Raleigh (DRA n.d.). In downtown Raleigh, a BID, was established to improve the business and urban environment. Downtown Raleigh’s BID is divided into five districts.

3.2 Sampling

The population of interest for this exploratory study was tourism professionals, defined as all individuals with direct professional experience with tourist behavior in downtown Raleigh, and urban planning professionals, defined as all individuals with professional responsibilities associated with

the revitalization of downtown Raleigh. Two nonprobability sampling techniques—purposive and snowball sampling strategies—were employed in this study. Purposive sampling is used to seek out predefined groups and is often used in exploratory studies (Trochim 2006).

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify the study's initial sampling frame. With assistance from two external consultants and the President and CEO of the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau, the initial sampling frame was developed by enumerating all tourism industry professionals whose job responsibilities included interaction with visitors. The consultants identified three tourism-oriented organizations in Raleigh. Only those staff members with direct knowledge of and/or experience with visitor behavior in downtown Raleigh were chosen for inclusion in the sampling frame. A sampling frame of urban planners and others with a professional interest in downtown Raleigh revitalization was constructed using online staff directories of three urban planning-related organizations in downtown Raleigh.

Additional respondents were identified using a snowball sampling technique, whereby initial respondents recommended that others be included in the sample, based on their affiliation with the tourism or urban planning profession.

3.3 Data Collection

Standardized in-person and telephone interviews were conducted over a three-month span (August-October, 2007) with 45 tourism industry professionals and 23 urban planning professionals for a total sample size of 68 respondents. Interviews were chosen as the method for data collection in order to obtain respondents' "top of mind" responses to the questions. The section of the interview relevant to this paper consisted of three questions about the most visited sites in downtown Raleigh. Respondents were asked to list, in rank order, their perceptions of the top 10 most visited attractions and places, the top 5 most frequented lodging properties, and the top 10 most visited restaurants

for visitors to downtown Raleigh. Respondents were prompted not to provide their own personal preferences, but rather to indicate their perceptions of the most popular sites for tourists in downtown Raleigh.

4.0 RESULTS

Spatial relationships were identified through a geographic analysis of the data. The following subsections summarize the results of the interview questions regarding the most-visited attractions and places and restaurants, as these were the questions where geographic patterns in the data were exposed.

4.1 Findings Pertaining to Attractions and Places

On the map of the total sample's perceptions of the most-visited attractions and places, high-frequency responses were located in two main clusters. The first cluster consisted of state-run museums and attractions, such as the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences and the State Capitol. A smaller cluster of attractions consisted of museums and attractions relating to art and culture, including Marbles Kids Museum and a collection of galleries and shops called City Market. These two clusters could also be interpreted as one larger collection spanning three downtown districts, representing what was termed a "family-friendly attraction zone" in downtown Raleigh (Figure 1).

Currently, the Downtown Raleigh Alliance (DRA) promotes five distinct downtown districts, whose descriptions lack any mention of families or family-friendly activities (DRA, n.d.). The geographically contiguous collection of family-friendly tourist options identified in this study fills this void and, if properly marketed to families, could attract additional day and overnight visitors to downtown Raleigh. Additional marketing implications will be addressed in the discussion section.

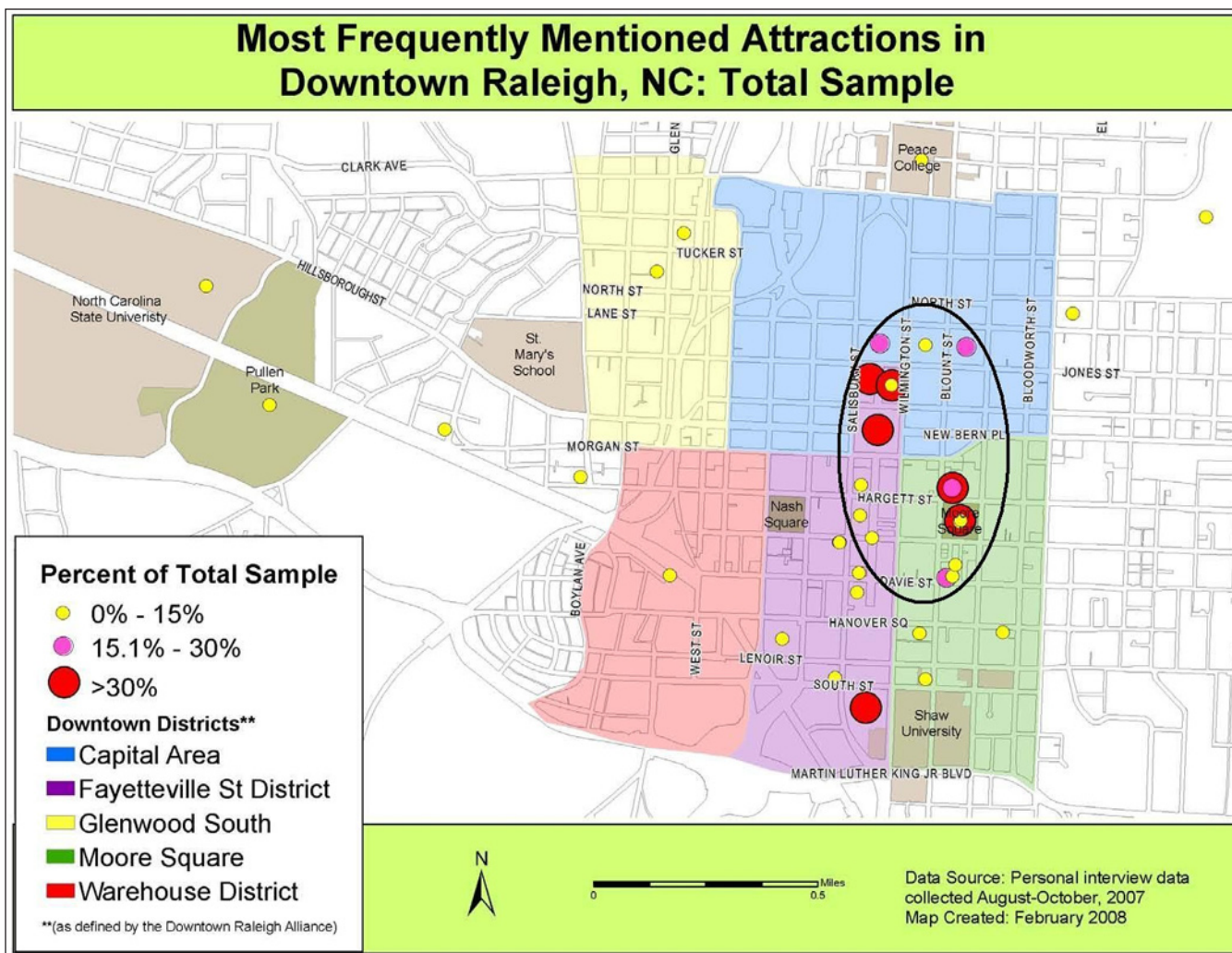


Figure 1.—GIS map of downtown Raleigh attractions.

4.2 Findings Pertaining to Restaurants

Seventeen restaurants were mentioned by at least 15 percent of the total sample and were primarily clustered in three downtown districts: the Glenwood South District (8 restaurants), the Moore Square District (4 restaurants), and the Fayetteville Street District (3 restaurants). While the Glenwood South District is already well known for its restaurants, the geographic distribution of the restaurants in the latter two districts created a second inter-district restaurant zone that spanned the Fayetteville Street and Moore Square Districts (Figure 2).

Like the family-friendly attraction zone, this inter-district restaurant zone is neither acknowledged nor promoted by the Downtown Raleigh Alliance, since it straddles two downtown districts. The Glenwood

South District, described as “a thriving restaurant and retail environment” (DRA, n.d.) and “burgeoning with eclectic restaurants and spirited nightlife” (GRCVB 2007b), is promoted as downtown Raleigh’s dining mecca. Respondents in this study, however, identified almost the same number of restaurants in this inter-district restaurant zone (7 restaurants) as the Glenwood South District (8 restaurants), suggesting that there is a second geographic cluster of dining options in the Fayetteville Street-Moore Square area.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this case, the geographical information system (GIS) mapping tool helps us see beyond predetermined geographic boundaries to identify two new tourist experience zones in downtown Raleigh: a family-friendly attraction zone and an inter-district restaurant

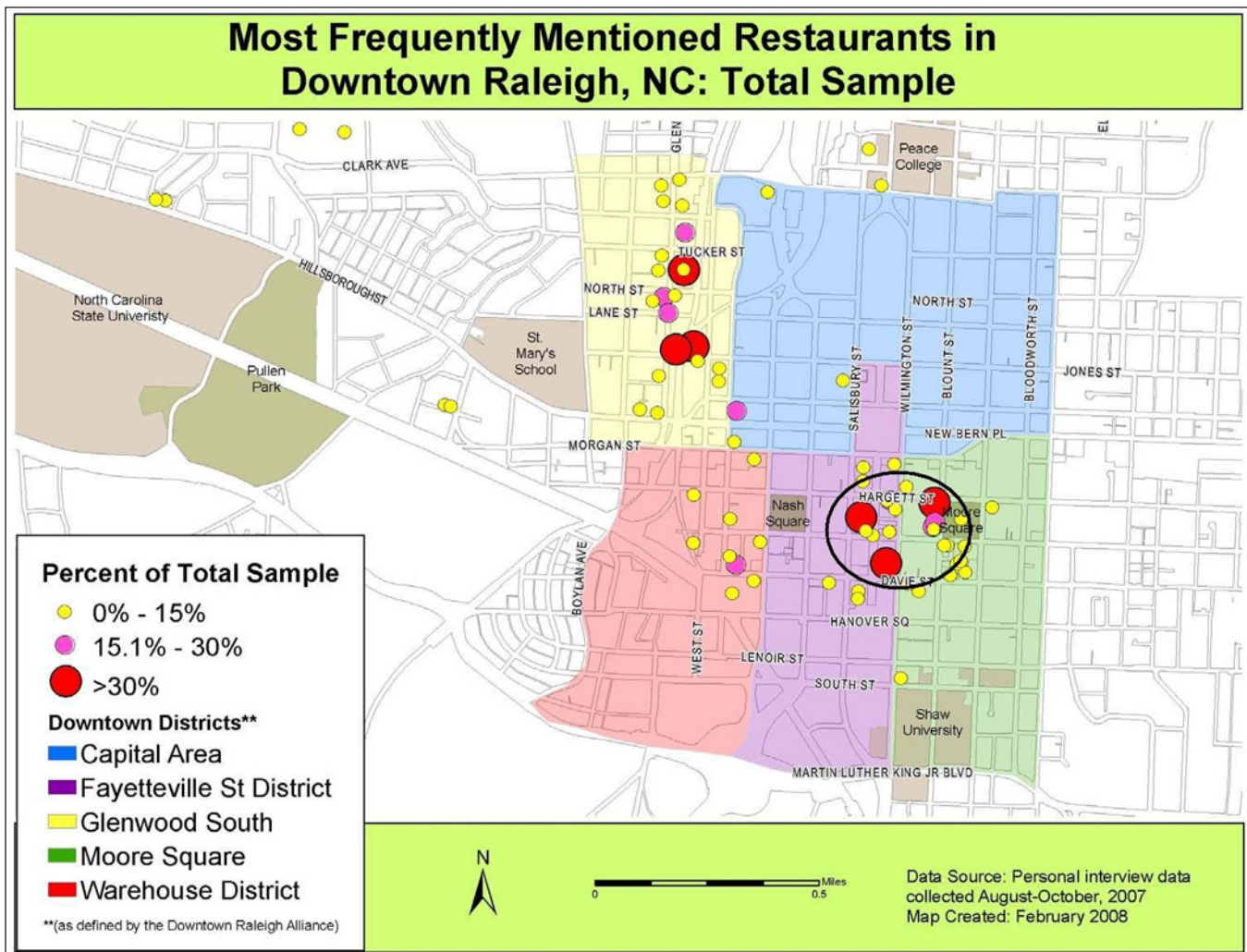


Figure 2.—GIS map of downtown Raleigh restaurants.

zone. The tourist experience zones can be promoted to a broader range of target markets to more clearly indicate opportunities for tourists in the city center and to increase visitation to the downtown area.

The family-friendly attraction zone is comprised of a number of state-run museums and attractions. Consequently, it already draws numerous school groups each year. However, this zone could be promoted to families, a market segment which sometimes perceives a downtown area as lacking wholesome affordable tourist activities. Specific to Raleigh, one respondent noted: “When 5 o’clock comes and things have closed, there’s not a whole lot left to do except restaurants, bars, and plays—nothing to do for kids or teens, such as a movie theater.”

Negative aspects of an urban tourist destination—such as traffic, inaccessibility, and perceptions of crime—often dissuade families from choosing a city for their vacation destination (Bramwell 1998). To challenge this misconception, the city of Raleigh could actively promote the walkability and accessibility of the family-friendly attraction zone identified in this study.

Marketing efforts could include: conducting market research to determine the types of families to include in the target market, developing a consistent marketing message to communicate to the target market, and distributing promotional materials (e.g., direct mail, radio, print advertisements) to the target market highlighting downtown Raleigh’s family-friendly attraction zone.

Highlighting the inter-district restaurant zone would be useful for overnight guests staying in the two largest hotels in downtown Raleigh, since the restaurants in this zone are within walking distance of both hotels. On the other hand, the Glenwood South District, which has been touted as the cornerstone of downtown Raleigh's dining scene, is located at least ½ mile from any downtown lodging property. According to urban planning literature, pedestrians would most likely regard ½ mile as too far to be considered "within walking distance" (Aurbach 2008). Urban planners use the term pedestrian shed—also called a "ped shed" or walkable catchment—to describe the "the area encompassed by the walking distance from a town or neighborhood center. Ped sheds are often defined as the area covered by a 5-minute walk (about 0.25 miles)" (Aurbach 2008). Based on Aurbach's definition, Glenwood South is not in the ped shed of any downtown lodging property.

The inter-district restaurant zone also has implications for the promotion of downtown Raleigh's dining options to residents and visitors. The "hip and trendy" (DRA, n.d.) Glenwood South District, with its mix of restaurants and nightclubs, is generally perceived to attract a younger crowd. On the other hand, the second restaurant zone of the Fayetteville Street and Moore Square Districts, which intersects the family-friendly attraction zone also identified in this study, has the potential to attract families and older adults to downtown Raleigh in addition to the young professionals, college students, and downtown office workers who are already targeted.

Downtown Raleigh is at a crossroads where tourism development has the potential to improve the quality of life for urban residents and enhance the experiences of visitors. The findings from this study—specifically the notion that the five downtown districts comprising the BID did not accurately reflect respondents' perceptions of tourism activity in downtown Raleigh—can be used as a platform for future research.

Data were displayed geographically using GIS software to detect patterns in respondents' perceptions

of the spatial distribution of the urban tourism supply (i.e., attractions & places, accommodations, restaurants). The technique developed in this study can be applied to other destinations in future research to improve understanding of the spatial relationships among tourist attractions, restaurants, and lodging properties in cities. Maps are an effective way to display research findings to stakeholders. Each map created for this study condensed a large amount of data into a single figure. In addition to sharing these maps with tourism and urban planning professionals, maps can also be circulated to restaurateurs, hotel developers, and transportation officials in charge of signage and directions. These stakeholders would benefit from knowing the locations of the pockets of tourism activity in downtown Raleigh, including the family-friendly attraction zone and the inter-district restaurant zone that were revealed in this study.

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