

PUBLIC POLICIES OF URBAN REGENERATION AND PROMOTION OF LEISURE, TOURISM AND ENTERTAINMENT: THE CREATION OF URBAN TOURISM PRECINCTS IN MANCHESTER, ENGLAND

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In the last four decades, several global factors and trends led to the ascension of urban regeneration policies in the public agenda, as well as transformed the logic, financing and objectives of cultural policies. We can emphasize four aspects regarding these transformations. First, the intensification of the process of globalization, with the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence between countries, regions and cities, companies and individuals around the world, in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

Second, the changing role of the state, characterized by the progressive replacement of the Welfare State – provider of social rights, redistributive policies and direct intervention on the economy – by the regulatory state; it is important to note that the qualifier «regulatory» is the opposite of one of its main characteristics, deregulation, through the privatization of public companies, flexibility of labor markets and economic liberalization, among other measures.

Third, the intense economic restructuring of the past four decades, marked by the increased flexibility of labor markets, the structuring of entirely new sectors of production, the centrality of research and development function and the unprecedented advance in the technology of communications and transport; the increase in the relative importance of services in the economy is followed by further accelerated growth in specific sectors, such as business and governmental consulting, insurance, entertainment, data storage, creative industries, leisure and tourism etc.

Fourth, culture took on a new role in current society and markets, as the result of the rise of postmodern cultural forms in various cultural fields; besides that, the production of culture have established a central role in society – everything is culture, and culture is all –, being dominated by the market rationale, as seen in the cultural policies.

One of the results of these global factors and trends is that, since at least the 1980s, cultural policies, rather than constituting a realm apart under the rule of a cultural elite

or pressure groups, are increasingly embedded within broad strategies of economic development, urban regeneration and image building of cities, regions and countries.

Urban regeneration policies appeared in the last four decades in municipal strategic plans as the solution to all kinds of urban problems, being them physical, economic or social. Abandoned industrial areas, decayed and abandoned urban centres, underutilized docks, redundant monumental buildings, sometimes ruined, church courtyards and public parks, urban voids – all these structures and spaces came to be the object of urban regeneration projects.

The growing process of globalization – with the increase of transnational flows of skilled and unskilled labor, technology, speculative capital and foreign direct investment – promotes competition between cities and territories for qualified labor, companies of dynamic economic sectors and foreign investment. In short, there is the formation of a global competition between cities for the attraction of these elements with high geographical mobility. As a result, the cultural and urban regeneration policies increasingly try to prepare the city to compete for these transnational flows and to attend external users, at the expense of local residents.

Since the 1980s, many English cities have formulated and implemented urban regeneration policies, including all the centres of metropolitan counties – Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle. In general, the projects aim to combine the physical and functional recuperation of abandoned and/or deteriorated areas with the creation of a new local economic base. These projects promote financial and consulting services, leisure, tourism and entertainment, retail trade etc. Despite presenting common objectives, the projects produce different results, considering the particularities of each city.

The object of study of this paper is the creation, management and promotion of urban-tourism precincts in central Manchester, England, within the objective, firmly pursued by the local council, since at least the late 1980s, to provide a new economic base, including turning it into a major international tourist destination.

The paper has two main objectives: a) to understand the creation of these urban tourism precincts within broader developments in England and the world, mainly referred to the new cultural and urban regeneration policies; and b) to analyze the management and promotion of the nine urban tourism precincts of central Manchester, assessing how they form the second most important tourist destination in England, and structure the experience of tourists and visitors in the city.

The research methodology included literature review, primary sources, interviews, participant observations and photographic survey. Fieldwork was conducted in January and February 2011, having contemplated Manchester, Salford, Bury, Kingston upon Hull, York, Sheffield, Liverpool, Chester and Wigan. Although the paper focuses on the former capital of cotton, it is enriched with observations regarding the other cities.

In the last twenty-five years, Manchester has become a post-industrial centre of leisure and tourism, fashion, shopping and financial and business consulting services leaving behind the reputation of being a decadent industrial city. This was the result of a series of programs, projects and activities of Central Manchester Development Corporation (1988-1996) and later the local council. As one result, part of the central area was divided into nine urban tourism precincts, clearly identified and defined as such.

The central area is undergoing an advanced process of tourismification directed by the local council; it is not possible to understand its recent history without considering the rise of tourism in the local public agenda, which favors external users – tourists and visitors – in urban policies. Even the sense of direction and place of some local residents is based on the tourism division of the central area. Moreover, affluent residents attracted to this urban space, in the last twenty-five years, demand the same business and facilities frequented by tourists and visitors, like hotels and sophisticated restaurants, unique shops, shopping centres etc.

The creation, management and promotion of nine precincts in the central area have been effective in transforming Manchester into a major European tourist destination, within the intent of creating a new economic base. The urban tourism precincts provide various advantages for the tourism development of Manchester. First, they assist tourists and visitors in exploring the central area, giving clear references of where they are, how to organize itineraries and shopping trips, and what to find in each of them. They also allow the local council to reach various tourism markets and segments, either by type of tourism (cultural, business and events etc.) or by specific audiences (LGBT etc.).

The precincts also influence the local council action in central area, regarding leisure, tourism and entertainment. This is patent in the promotion of events and festivals; the street level public action is influenced by this division. For example, Castlefield, where the urban environment (cleaning, security and urban maintenance) is particularly important, has an exclusive company to take care of public spaces, the Castlefield Management Company.

Culture is the basis of distinction of most of the precincts, from their valuable cultural heritage and major cultural facilities, the culture of particular collective identities and/or the promotion of attractive lifestyles and multicultural environments. Multiple shopping experiences are also used to promote the precincts, but the exclusivity, sophistication, big retail names and fashion are the most important elements used.

The creation, management and promotion of precincts allow Manchester to promote itself as a city that is worth nine different tourist destinations, each with its own identity, activities, facilities and experiences. That is a powerful incentive in choosing Manchester as tourist destination; besides that, the tourist or visitor is encouraged not to remain restricted to few places in the central area, but to explore the different urban tourist precincts, spending more and prolonging its stay.

The set of interviews, conversations and participant observations with tourists makes clear the precincts create the notion that Manchester is a city composed of several different tourist destinations, making it more interesting to visit and stay.

However, two observations must be made. First, the heterogeneity of the central area cultural and tourist attractions, with nine different precincts, unveils, in certain ways, homogeneity, when compared to other British cities; Chinatown and The Gay Village are emblematic in that regard. Part of this «fault» does not lie on Manchester, being the result of broader developments. For example, financial and business services demand an area as Spinningfields. For its part, the consolidation of British retail in large national and international chains is making the cities to have an increasing similar offer of shops, services and products, as one finds in the Central Retail District.

Second, this new economic base still did not allow Manchester to overcome its high poverty rate of one third of the population. It is not an isolated phenomenon, however; the increasing United Kingdom income inequality helps to understand the prevalence of high poverty rates in almost all the big cities of the country, especially Liverpool (45%). However, the priority given to economic efficiency and development issues in the local public agenda at the expense of redistributive concerns, reinforces the problem in Manchester, which has been exacerbated since 2008, with the outbreak of the global financial and economic crisis.

Despite these observations, the urban tourism precincts are an effective way to attract tourists and visitors to Manchester, in an increasingly competitive tourism market; it is transforming the local economic base and creating employment and income in a postindustrial city.

Key words: Urban tourism precincts; Urban regeneration; Local economic development; Culture, heritage and identity.