

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS AND EVALUATIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE AT TOURIST DESTINATIONS. ANALYSIS OF THE CITY OF SEVILLE BY MEANS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Inmaculada Mercado Alonso

Alfonso Fernández Tabales

Universidad de Sevilla

imercado@us.es, aftabales@us.es

The departure point for the work explored in this article is the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000) and the lead role it grants to social perception in the very definition of the landscape concept: “*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*”. While the study focuses on the relationship between the landscape and the tourism phenomenon, an understanding of how the landscape is perceived by the resident population, as well as by visitors who experience and enjoy that landscape on a temporary basis at certain times, is also of interest. The article aims to provide information about how the urban landscape is perceived by both residents and visitors in areas most frequented by tourists in the city of Seville, identify conflicts and aspirations projected in both groups and discern what can be learned from the experience per the methodological focus to gain an understanding of the social perception in urban tourism destinations.

In the theoretical framework it was necessary to introduce several brief references regarding the three basic analysis elements, i.e. the concept of urban landscape, the development of tourism activity in cities and the relationship between both elements, which determines the concern regarding the city’s image and the opportunities and conflicts engendered by that relationship.

The objectives set out in the article are the following:

- a. To identify the perception and assessment of urban landscape/tourism conflicts by residents and visitors;
- b. To compare those perceptions and evaluate the intensity and extent of the differences between both;
- c. To identify the aspirations and aims of the groups examined regarding urban landscape management in the indicated tourism destinations.

Those objectives posed several methodological challenges.

First of all, the subject of the research (urban landscape) does not have a single interpretation for the whole of society. And although the context studied (area most frequented by tourists in the city of Seville) and respective elements to consider is spatially limited, the answers may lie beyond those geographic and conceptual bounds, which correspond to criteria more academic than perceptual.

Second, the subject of the analysis includes the local population (especially those who live or carry out their economic activity in the delimited area and the public or private players involved) and visitors. The former is accessible and can be approached with conventional social research tools. The latter present the difficulty of being a non-resident population who stay for a limited time, generally short periods, in scattered locations and not organised as a group. With qualitative tools (those used for this research) it is hard to approach this research subject, which explains why one visitor type in particular was chosen, registering a somewhat longer average stay (Spanish language students, Erasmus students, etc).

In view of these characteristics the development of a qualitative analysis methodology was proposed, based on the use of three basic tools: interviews with representative actors, discussion groups and analysis of media information. Three basic blocs were determined as content of the methodological instruments: a) concept of urban landscape, b) general appraisal of the state of the urban landscape of the city of Seville and assessment of urban landscape elements in the area most frequented by tourists, and c) measures to improve urban landscape quality in the destination.

Analysis of the results allows conclusions to be drawn with respect to those three major blocs. First, regarding the **urban landscape concept**, it can be stated that despite its complexity it is recognised and identified by most of the participants. The urban landscape is nonetheless more easily associated to the “*old city or area of historic monuments*”. That is, the urban landscape is repeatedly identified with the heritage landscape owing to the history and artistic/cultural value of the buildings and urban fabrics (quiet, narrow streets), which is also granted positive and identity-related aesthetic attributes. The Guadalquivir River and its surroundings often appear as a historic and very consolidated image of Seville, which is still recognised and valued in current social perceptions. The landscape elements most mentioned and/or most identified with the concept are **façades and buildings, squares and pedestrian spaces, outdoor cafés/bars/restaurants, and trees and gardens**. The urban landscape elements least mentioned or least identified with the general concept are **pavements and sidewalks, advertising, signage and urban furniture**. This seems to indicate that small-scale detail-focused elements are outside the more scenic common conception of the urban landscape.

The general appraisal of Seville’s urban landscape is very acceptable in both groups. The text of the article mentions the nuances that may be more meaningful due to the different perception of tourists and residents or precisely because tourism activity is what leads to a negative perception or one of conflict. Due to its current relevance and the differences in both groups the value placed on outdoor seating areas stands out, considered negative by residents and positive by tourists (especially those of Spanish, French

or Italian origin), or the presence of trees, much highlighted by visitors to the city but barely mentioned by residents and even criticised vis-à-vis their care and maintenance.

The instruments of qualitative research also revealed information about the main urban landscape conflicts and their localisation. In different areas of the city the causes of degraded urban landscape quality were identified, such as the invasion of advertising by shops selling souvenirs and/or oriented to tourist customers, the concentration of outdoor tables, business specialisation dominated by major franchises instead of more traditional commerce and more personalised establishments with local identity, aggressive advertising on façades (even listed ones) and the disruption of views and the general setting by inappropriate elements.

When evaluating the changes associated to tourism activity that have occurred in Seville's urban landscape, some positive ones stand out, such as cleanness, the increasing number of pedestrian spaces, urban light-rail tram access, and renewal and restoration of historic buildings, etc. Others are negative and indicate how difficult it is for residents and hotel guests to access the historic centre due to pedestrianisation, the profusion of franchises and effects of mass tourism, especially in the Santa Cruz quarter. It is precisely that loss of authenticity found in areas most visited by tourists that is considered a threat for both residents and the tourists alike.

In the open questions, on steps to take to improve the quality of Seville's urban landscape, most of the answers must be attributed to residents and particularly tourism actors. They can be classified in three groups: a) measures concerning tourism management (e.g. the need to re-plan opening times and systems for accessing major monuments to avoid crowding), those associated to urban management (compliance with regulations on advertising and outdoor tables, noise and horse-drawn carriages, etc, along with minor urban rearrangements, etc) and those that can be considered as pertaining to urban strategy policy (strengthening spaces for consultation and design of the city model and tourism model).

Regarding the methodological evaluation some conclusions are described. First, the methodology meant to gain an understanding of the perception and social evaluation of the urban landscape can confirm, orient and complement the information that can be obtained by bibliographical, statistical and mapping tools, etc. Second, the instruments and procedures for qualitative research are suitable and adjust well when the analysis subject is the resident population, but present more problems for visitors. Third, the combination of participation instruments is thus a key for gathering different registers of relevant content and achieving varied profiles of the resident and visitor populations. Fourth, the participation instruments are shown to be effective for generating knowledge about people's perception regarding identification and criteria for evaluating urban landscapes, conflicts associated to the tourism function and aspirations projected therein. And ultimately, fifth, research about landscape that includes citizen participation processes can help unleash dynamics with greater social reach by setting in motion mechanisms for awareness-raising and co-responsibility regarding the respective planning, protection and management.

Finally, it seems fitting to indicate that the participation processes described are a source of information and knowledge, though they can also become a mechanism that

awakens awareness and social mobilisation in areas highly frequented by tourists, where degradation or trivialisation of traditional urban landscapes has been detected, and hence very recommendable processes for governance of such destinations.