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Innovation in heritage tourism – a contradiction in terms?

This paper sets out some foundations for a theory of innovation at heritage tourist attractions. It demonstrates the role that innovation plays in enabling heritage tourist sites to remain sustainable in a constantly shifting market and proposes that innovation occurs in waves based on changes in social values and meaning over time.

The discussion starts by considering how heritage tourism places are able to innovate using their unique competitive advantage in order to remain relevant to a changing audience.

Heritage places prevail in an environment shaped by disequilibrium where public perception fluctuates constantly within limits imposed by current social attitudes, expectations and values (Wanhill, 2003). Disequilibrium is also served by the dynamic nature of history as new episodes, added to the story of place, result in changing attitudes and values about the relationship between the past and the present (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, Burns, 2006).

This constantly shifting environment offers opportunities for innovation when the accepted meanings associated with the place alter, initiating new interpretation, presentation and delivery (Richards and Wilson, 2006).

Reasons for change at heritage places can broadly be determined using a range of existing theories from several disciplines including; innovation (Schumpeter, 1939, Bessant and Davies, 2007, Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2002), tourism (Hjalager, 2001, Mattsson et al., 2005, Wanhill, 2003, Richards and Wilson, 2006, Butler, 1980), museum studies (Wouters, 2009, Goulding, 2000), marketing (Utterback et al., 2006, Reed et al., 1999), sociology (Franklin, 2004, Wallendorf, 1980, Shaw and Williams, 2004, Tranter and Donoghue, 2007, Young, 1999), experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2002, Richards and Wilson, 2006, Giaccardi and Palen, 2008), heritage (Bonn et al., 2007, DeSilvey, 2006, Maddern, 2005, McIntosh, 1999, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, Gonzalez, 2007, Poria et al., 2003, Waitt, 2000) and interpretation (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, Tilden, 1957, Uzzell and Ballantyne, 1998, Voase, 2002, Gold and Gold, 2007, Chronis, 2005,

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Edensor, 2001, Pocock, 2006, McIntosh, 1999, Poria et al., 2003); but none consider how the unique characteristics of heritage sites become the drivers and determinants of innovation. To date, most innovation theories applied to tourism concentrate on adopted and adapted technologies as drivers rather than the story of place and the meanings and values attached to place by the wider public. This research examines the innovations driven by internal factors which are part of the heritage core rather than those external factors which are then applied to heritage places.

The premise is that heritage places which have iconic status require a more innovative approach than places of non-iconic status. The difference lies in the associations which iconic sites have to national identity and consequently the spectrum of visitors for whom they may need to provide (Poria et al., 2003). Iconic sites attract a wide range of visitors, including those with specific interests in history and heritage as well as those who have a less defined interest in place but are motivated by associations with identity (Tranter and Donoghue, 2007). Management planning needs to provide for all types of visitors and create the triggers for a range of experiences which are multilayered and meaningful despite the blend of prior experience, knowledge and expectation which each visitor brings.

Innovations at heritage tourist places tend to be incremental rather than radical, suggesting that time is a factor. Innovations based on the internal assets of a heritage site include changes in product, process and paradigm (Bessant and Davies, 2007). This paper proposes that innovation occurs periodically creating a pattern of waves which are driven by changes in social attitudes, the distance of time and current trends.

A chronological case study at Port Arthur, the iconic heritage attraction in Tasmania was undertaken as a phenomenological study to identify the triggers for changes in meaning which, in turn, became the drivers and determinants of innovation. The chronological study

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enabled the temporal context to become an integral factor in the analysis of change based on social value and perception over time.

The first wave of innovation occurs when a place changes from its previous purpose into a tourist attraction. Heritage attractions have stories which comprise popular opinion, which spark individual imagination and which deliver a level of perceived knowledge, including fact, myth and rumour. As soon as access is granted, visitors are motivated through curiosity and sensationalism to see the place which has long been the focus of speculation, resulting in mass tourism. Demand creates opportunities for entrepreneurs to provide support services, including: accommodation, access, guiding and amenities. Built infrastructure and first hand accounts create an illusion of authenticity and the artifacts displayed are site specific and part of the story of place. The visitor experience is based on 'being there', and seeing the site in its 'original' state. The place becomes a monument representing itself - as a place for tourists.

The second wave occurs when tourism is established as the primary purpose. Authenticity is embedded in the geographic location, the built infrastructure and the physical objects and artifacts displayed. The collection of items expands in order to give a temporal setting for the story and includes more everyday objects. The interpretation and presentation of the story is the focus of innovation which presents an official opinion and accepted history frequently including heroes and national figures. The place has a recognised role in national identity and the interpretation explains how it fits into the broader story.

Competition from alternative types of tourism and other leisure pursuits prompts the third wave of innovation. The presentation and story are updated and added to in order to become multilayered giving a less partisan account. Contemporary themes link the current social environment to the past, through stories of individuals who represent everyday events.

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Audience participation is encouraged and expected in order to create an experience which is memorable, meaningful and personal.

The paper concludes that if a heritage tourist attraction is to be sustainable, innovation should be an on-going strategy. In order to continue being relevant to their audience innovations should come from the 'inside out' by concentrating on the internal assets and resources which are the competitive advantage of a heritage site. The internal assets of a heritage place are the aspects of the story which are meaningful to the visitor and which make the place unique, valued and relevant.

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