

BOOK REVIEW

Tourists Signs and the City: The Semiotics of Culture in an Urban Landscape

Michelle M. Metro-Roland, editor (2011). Ashgate Publishing

This book could be described as a phenomena of today's global environment; that environment that governs our socio-cultural concepts rather than the one that dominates our socio-economic ones! Thirty years ago, or even twenty years ago a book such as this may have been looked upon as an interesting study about sociology or even a historical account of an urban space that was coming to terms with the tourist industry and its influence on local culture and life. But twenty years ago we were still living in the shadow of a divided Europe, of countries isolated from each other by political and very definite social barriers and by a tourist industry that looked at the segregation of foreign visitors from local residents and local culture. A lot has happened in the past twenty years, we now have a new emerging map of Europe with a number of countries having tasted their first two decades of the global lifestyle and economy, we have seen changes in peoples' attitudes towards governments and autocratic rule, we have even seen changes in technology and the way we communicate and all this has led to even more factors that have even affected the way we consider travel and destinations. Most travellers and tourists today are not looking for packaged holidays to "home-from-home" surroundings, neither are they looking at being accommodated in tourist ghettos, segregated from the everyday lives and sounds of residents and urban spaces or rural expanses. Tourists today want integration, they want to taste the flavours of the countries they visit, they want to feel part of the urban and local spaces and they want to experience the rural expanse.

Students of marketing will recall the emphasis that was put on the term: "Know your product" and one of the first things that this book brings to mind is the aspect of "Product"; but we talk about this product as if it were something inanimate, a thing, a component and an object for seeing, using and discarding! The first three chapters are all about

understanding and knowing the product, in the case of tourism it is all about appreciating and integrating with the Culture, the very essence of the host community, not in a way that turns every local event into a side show for the benefit of visitors but as a means of interpreting the urban and rural spaces within the context of the particular ambience. To understand sites, attractions or even places it is important that there is this kind of bonding, if one could call this so, between the mental and physical images which are implanted in the mind of the visitor and the intangible heritage that emanates through the tangible heritage which signifies the sense of identity and Culture which the community or society today have included in their dowry when these became essential components for the visitor who wants to be at the site or to be part of the socio-cultural interaction between host and visitor. The author describes (Chapter 3) the transition from a totally alien tourist gaze to one that reflects a more street savvy visitor who is not easily taken in by pseudo interpretation but who, on the other hand, look for the experiences that are both authentic and unique. A number of keywords attracted my attention in the chapter on Landscape and Tourism and these were : “Multifarious” when referring to the destination that has been created as a commodity and the term “City Branding” both of which give the distinct impression that many authorities are trying to create or invent somewhere that can only be described as “a smokescreen –like representation of places”. These first three chapters of the book identify the real “moments of truth” of the host-visitor experiences in tourism; those moments when the visitor is not segregated but can be fully integrated with the socio-cultural environment.

After setting the scene and plotting out the strategy, in other words, after performing the role of the tourist or visitor who wants to be at a destination, the author turns to an interesting methodology for assessing and measuring visitor perceptions and experiences of destinations. Using the VEP (Visitor Employed Photography) the idea of using pictures as a sign, an illustrated description and the international language that expresses one’s real experience as a tourist, this study set out to understand not only the strength of the interpretation, but also those aspects that identified the Hungarian City other than the more popular and well known attractions and buildings.

Certainly one of the best conclusions that were stated in this study was the issue of the interaction between the tourist and the host community. The photographs that were taken included details of

Hungarian identity whether this was identified with specific architecture, whether by showing a Trabant outside a typical Hungarian building or whether it was in the particular road signs. One aspect that this study does certainly prove is that today's tourist is not looking for pseudo attractions and sites, they do not want to experience that feeling of not having left home, the visitor wants to experience different Cultures, Sceneries and Histories.

At a time when we are seeing a number of destinations and regions maturing and struggling to maintain market share this book could provide the right recipe for that particular and unique dish of local flavours without the addition of imported spices and ingredients which render that dish familiar to the visitor but alien to the cook! Tourism Authorities, Planning officials and local Councillors would do well to take up the challenge of sustainable gentrification of urban spaces and rural areas. This book should serve as a guide and a manual for Sustainable Tourism planning and policies for these entities.

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