New Urban Project: Regenerating historic centres through Habitability

Cordoba Path

CityLab "Rethinking tourism to restore balance in historic city centers"

Co-organized by the European Alliance on Balanced Urban Tourism and the Organization of World Heritage Cities
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REPORT

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Tourism is a major economic sector in all World Heritage Cities and is closely intertwined with nearly every aspect of historic center management. As part of the elaboration process of the New Urban Project (NUP) carried out since 2023, OWHC member cities have pointed out several issues and concerns related to tourism and the difficulties to conciliate so many complex issues it involves with habitability. It is indispensable that the NUP proposes a way to handle tourism.

The "Amsterdam CityLab"[1] aimed to make a meaningful contribution in this prospect, thanks to the support of the European Alliance on Balanced Urban Tourism's approach.

INTRODUCTION

Each historic city has its own "cultural tourism" strategy exploiting local heritage and cultural specificities. They may focus on major events, heritage classification, gastronomy, etc., implementing specific targets, and proposing specific offers (senior citizens, families, small groups, upmarket, etc.). They are having positive local impacts (craftsmen, restaurateurs, seasonality, etc.), but they also become a source of concern (growing of land prices, pressures on public spaces, etc.). The central hypothesis for the CityLab is that "balanced urban tourism" in historic cities is possible, in so far it can propose quality of the interactions between tourism strategy and the specific living environment.

In many cases, tourism revolves around a single urban narrative, chosen primarily for its economic appeal. This highly specific and targeted approach leads to growing tourist flows concentrated in a physically limited area—both in terms of public spaces and residential or commercial land. The planned expansion of "cultural tourism" brings significant challenges, such as overcrowded public spaces, rising speculation in housing and commercial property, and the displacement of local businesses in favour of (multi)national chains. It also makes cities increasingly economically dependent on foreign visitors. By focusing on a single, dominant story, efforts to maintain the tourism offer often prioritize preserving heritage in an unchanging form, which in turn encourages the "monoculturalization" of historic centres. It is only in recent years that the issue has become a political one, emerging when the level of nuisance reached a point where remaining residents not only started to assert their right to continue living in the historic center, but they wanted to do so in a vibrant environment where local services were accessible. Awareness has grown further in the wake of the recent pandemic, which abruptly halted international travel and exposed the fragility of tourism-dependent

[1] Participating cities: Amsterdam, Krakow, Luxembourg, Paris, San Sebastian, Brussels and Porto

systems. At the same time, increasingly frequent and intense heatwaves are prompting a rethink of public spaces designed primarily for tourists. The arrival of migrants is forcing cities to adapt their reception policies, while mounting pressure on land driven by tourism is sparking growing resistance among local residents.

In this sense, the responses of historic cities to overtourism and monoculturalism must be adapted to their reality as inhabited and habitable places capable of continuing welcoming those who may be future residents (students, young workers, families, etc.).

FINDINGS

Main challenges cities are facing due to the monoculturalization implied by tourism:

- **Governance and coordination**: difficulty integrating all stakeholders (elected officials, municipal services, merchants, residents) into a coherent approach.
- **Overcrowding and flow management**: saturated spaces, excessive concentration in certain areas, loss of quality of life and identity for residents.
- **Housing and livability**: real estate and tourism pressure making housing inaccessible, jeopardizing the residential function of historic centers.
- **Preservation of authenticity**: risks of folklorization and weakening of the local fabric (iconic shops, living culture).
- **Events and overuse of spaces**: proliferation of events and intensive uses (rooftops, historic centers), increasing pressure.
- **Mobility and congestion**: traffic jams, conflicts between modes of transport, accessibility difficulties.

Proposed solutions:

- **Improve governance**: establish new working frameworks, strengthen cross-functional collaboration, and enhance training/awareness among stakeholders.
- **Better distribute flows**: promote lesser-known areas, develop outlying areas, encourage longer stays, diversify markets and visitor profiles.
- **Protect residential function**: regulate short-term rentals, explore new legal frameworks for the right to housing, develop accessible housing, and maintain local services.
- **Support local actors**: invest in communities, support traditional businesses through subsidies, technical assistance, and training programs.
- **Redefine the tourist experience**: co-create with operators, encourage interaction between residents and visitors, promote sustainable practices and “green” hotels.
- **Take action on mobility**: promote soft and collective mobility, introduce congestion charging zones, park & ride facilities, and educate visitors about local practices (e.g., explanatory videos, bicycle training).
- **Provide management tools**: develop measurement and monitoring tools (applications, indicators) to better adapt public policies.

Objectives and obstacles:

Overall, defining and implementing balanced urban tourism requires an integrated approach combining innovation, clear governance, citizen involvement, strong residential policies, and the redevelopment of public spaces. In this sense, the concept of habitability, as proposed by the OWHC in the context of the NUP, is likely to create conditions conducive to balanced urban tourism.

By confronting the Operational Objectives defined by the Community of Practice with balanced urban tourism, CityLab participants were able to determine that the objectives of the New Urban Project CAN contribute to balanced urban tourism, which in turn can contribute to the regeneration of habitability, although they still have identified certain obstacles to their implementation:

1. Transform historic centers into urban laboratories of innovation

- Promotes new policies and tools to manage tourist flows, test innovative solutions (digitalization, tactical urbanism), promote local narratives, and create new entrepreneurial models.
- Enables the integration of residents, visitors, and entrepreneurs into a shared narrative and enriches the urban offering.

Obstacles:
- Difficulties in convincing the tourism sector to adopt new approaches.
- Risks related to costs, lack of expertise, and often retrospective validation.
- Technological barriers, loss of human contact, need for professional retraining.

2. Establish permanent cross-functional governance

- Enables more holistic and transparent strategies, better coordination between local/national/European levels, and harmonization of tourism management models between cities.
- Clarifies the distribution of roles and strengthens decision-making power in the face of pressure from the tourism sector.

Obstacles:
- Overlapping administrative levels (European, national, local) and political conflicts.
- Lack of clarity on "where management power lies" and fragility of existing models (DMOs, tourist offices).
- Difficulties in creating a joint steering body and aligning all stakeholders.

3. Involve citizens in the co-construction of urban projects

- Gives residents a voice and strengthens authenticity, a sense of belonging, and solidarity.
- Encourages engagement among residents, who are more inclined to participate when their opinions are recognized.

Obstacles:
- Complexity of reconciling all points of view and need for more targeted tools.
- Lack of human resources and difficulty reaching certain specific audiences.

4. Retaining and attracting new residents

- Increases the livability, demographic diversity, and economic vitality of city centers.
- Creates better living conditions (accessibility, housing, services), which helps to balance residential and tourist functions.

Obstacles:
- Conflicts of interest with powerful economic drivers (real estate, mass tourism).
- High costs, low impact of local initiatives at the macro-European level.

- Structural problems of access to housing, real estate speculation, insufficient infrastructure.

5. Rethinking public spaces and rights of way

- Improves coexistence between residents and visitors, enhances conviviality, and provides a healthier environment.
- Promotes positive interactions and better sharing of collective spaces.

Obstacles:
- Conflicts of use related to scarcity and multiplicity of functions (commerce, leisure, mobility).
- Difficulties in enforcing regulations and creating genuine meeting places between residents and visitors.

CONCLUSION

The Amsterdam CityLab brought together representatives from cities working in the fields of heritage, tourism, and economic development. This interdisciplinary workshop provided an opportunity to take a different approach to a subject that has not been addressed in detail in the context of the Cordoba Path.

In this particular context, it is important that the challenges, courses of action, and other findings identified during the workshop largely corresponds to the issues initially raised for the NUP. This leads to the conclusion that the NUP will indeed help World Heritage cities to devise solutions to issues relating to overtourism and monoculturalism. Furthermore, the hypothesis that balanced urban tourism, which has to be clarified by the Alliance at the lights of the CityLab, could be an additional means of regenerating habitability is reinforced.

In a nutshell, the general idea is the following: cultural tourism has been defined from the beginning and developed by economic exploitation of the heritage resources of a city. These are the perverse effects of such tourism which lead to problems and concerns. Tourism then appears as an end in itself, disconnected from the inner reality of the city. Tourism ultimately creates a power struggle or a tension, between authorities, inhabitants and other economic sectors, generating too limited action which then usually strengthens the existing imbalance. That is why historic centers in most countries have arrived to the point they must change the paradigm, redefine what they need. The city, including the historic centers, is made to be inhabited. The priority must be the inhabitants and their living conditions. The local habitability should become the reason why visitors wish to come in a city. The city is creating multiple usages and therefore multiply the reason to come to visit it. The tourist becomes a visitor who has to be welcomed, and hospitality is a valuable part of habitability.

These conclusions are all issues that could be used to design a second CityLab to finalize the proposals for the NUP. A few remarks, in the form of "Findings," could be examined by the Community of Practice at a later date:

a. Building on the earlier work by the OWHC and its members for the NUP, the CityLab underlined that this is indispensable to find alternative solutions to overcome overtourism and monoculturalism.

b. The NUP, as future OWHC common strategy, will provide planning tools and projects to ensure cities evolution in response to contemporary threats (including overtourism). As underlined during the CityLab, future projects will have to combine action in three main complementary fields:

   - high-quality and diverse housing, accompanied by local services;
   - public spaces designed as shared living environments, dedicated to the communities;
   - mobility that promotes accessibility and intermodality.

c. Habitability, as conceived by the OWHC, embodies an integrated vision of the historic center. From this perspective, heritage, both tangible and intangible, is an irreplaceable resource. In addition to being a marker of identity for residents, its adaptability multiplies the possibilities for envisaging futures that are faithful to the values of hospitable, inclusive, and resilient cities. Heritage exploited for habitability becomes a vehicle through which the intelligence of the city's territory, acquired over centuries, provides the energy for change.

d. It is not sufficient to continue prompting ad hoc measures by simply reducing the negative impacts of the most visible nuisances in specific locations. While a series of such one-off measures can help manage individual sites, they do not necessarily transform tourism into a driver for developing innovative and integrated urban strategies.

e. Moreover, it is no longer viable to base new urban approaches or alternatives on a single narrative or a single way of promoting it. Local authorities, experts, citizens, and economic stakeholders must dare to draw on their shared human, narrative, symbolic, and material resources to create new, inspiring, and mobilizing narratives tailored to each context.

f. Findings calling for "balanced urban tourism" broaden the concept of tourism to encompass all activities and the needs of all types of visitors and visits, i.e., the uses of the city by those who do not live there.

These findings outline a definition of balanced urban tourism as it should be integrated into the NUP.