#### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The role of trails in the creation of tourist space

#### **Abstract**

Trails and routes are increasingly ubiquitous features within the tourism landscape and although their role and usefulness as applied tourism products has been analysed, they remain undertheorized within the academic literature. This article addresses this gap by exploring the role of trails within the socio-cultural construction of space. In particular, the potential function of trails in creating themed, static spaces is analysed and the concept of *museumisation* is employed to further illustrate the capacity of trails to reconfigure spaces within specific cultural framings which may exclude local identity and yet are consumed by the unquestioning visitor. However, the article goes on to use more recent paradigms such as tourism's *performance turn* and the associated concept of embodiment to further explore the trail's potency in promoting a more engaged, multi-vocal and sensory experience of place. Using these contemporary approaches to the role of the tourist and the cultural construction of place, the article employs a range of examples to argue for the efficacy of trails as flexible, interpretive tools that allow a multiplicity of stories to be told and encourage visitors towards a more engaged interaction within the spaces through which they tour.

Keywords: trails; routes; theming; performance turn; museumisation; embodiment

### Introduction

Trails are a means of directing the visitor experience by providing a purposeful, interpreted route and these linear attractions have proliferated within the last three decades (Božić & Tomić, 2016; Timothy & Boyd, 2015). They are found in urban, rural, coastal and even underwater settings and provide a themed journey to be travelled by foot or by other modes of transport. Information to guide the traveller is provided via printed literature, way-marking features provided en route, websites and increasingly, by mobile applications and audio devices. Trails can vary in scale from the very local to the inter-national and interpret a wide range of themes and stories. They are of interest as applied tourism products as they are useful tools for destination managers, providing opportunities for interpretation, assisting with visitor management and creating a strong destination image. Timothy and Boyd (2015, p.15) conceptualise trails within a 'nested hierarchy' with the experiential aspects of the trail at the core, shaped respectively by the various trail types, their settings, scale and rationales and all operating within the wider policy environment. By placing the visitor experience at the heart of their model they emphasise the primacy of the interpretive function of trails. Their potential as transformational storytelling devices thus highlight key theoretical approaches to the study of tourist space and the visitor's engagement with it.

The themed trail or route is, of course, not a new concept and many of today's popular trails are based on ancient pilgrim or trade routes and hiking pathways. However new trails have also been developed to satisfy the growing need to create diversified place products and to address the demand for more individualised tourism experiences. Nonetheless, despite this

flowering of the trail concept, the accompanying academic literature in the field has not necessarily kept in step although a body of literature on tourism trails is finally emerging (Timothy & Boyd, 2015). The more applied aspects of the trails field have received the most attention and there is a growing literature on the creation of food and wine routes (Anderson & Law 2012; Jaffe & Pasternak 2004, Mason and O'Mahony 2007); the tourism development potential of trails (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Hardy, 2003; Lourens, 2007); their role in heritage interpretation (Al-hagla, 2010; Cheung, 1999; Leader-Elliott, 2005) and the environmental impacts of trail users (Manning, 2001; Marschall, 2012, Willard & Beeton, 2012). It is notable that comparatively little research has been undertaken on the rationales, development and management of trails (Prideaux & Carson, 2003, Timothy & Boyd, 2015) and their social impact (Zabbini, 2012). Particularly evident is the lack of analysis of their wider socio-cultural significance (Atalay, 2015) and it is this perspective that is the subject of this article. Taylor (2015, p. 107) refers to the interpretive trail as 'that under-theorized cousin of the museum, the park and the archaeological site' and as attractions which move visitors through space, organising and unifying the built and intangible heritage through place-narrative, it is interesting to consider how trails might contribute to the processes inherent in the construction and experience of tourist space. This article therefore attempts to address some of the gaps in the literature on these interesting and ubiquitous constructs by considering the role that trails play in the creation of tourist settings and in enhancing the engagement of visitors with these places.

## Trails and the construction of tourist space

The tourism academy has recently begun to place more emphasis on the concepts of tourist space/place, its construction and tourists' experiences as they engage with these settings (Crang 2004, 2006; Hughes 1998; Meethan, 2001; Meethan, 2006; Shaw & Williams 2004, Wearing, Stevenson & Young, 2010). Space in this sense refers not only to the physical landscapes of tourism but also to 'the imaginary and symbolic spaces which frame the travel experience' (Wearing et al., 2010, p. 134). New tourist spaces are, of course, physically constructed but aligned to this concrete space-production, is tourism's ability to reorganise existing cultural and physical manifestations into the discourse of tourist consumption. Thus tourism can bring about not just the physical but also the symbolic transformation of a place into a site to be visited. Analyses of the socially and culturally constructed nature of tourist space echo what is referred to as the 'the cultural turn' in the study of sociology and geography (Cook, Crouch, Naylor, & Ryan, 2000). The cultural turn has contributed much to recent tourism studies, setting the traditional critique of tourism as a consumer of places and local cultures alongside the idea that tourism and tourists can actually be a dynamic force, creating new spaces and meanings (Crang, 2004; Crouch, Aronsson, & Wahlstrom, 2001; Meethan, 2001). These studies emphasise that the production of tourist space involves both the physical setting and the socio-cultural context that creates it and is equally a metaphorical and a material form of construction (Meethan, 2001).

As linear visitor attractions, trails organise the environments that they inhabit and create new tourist spaces using selected themes and stories. The trail's task is therefore to create a sequence of sites to be visited and in doing so it creates a sense of order and a structured, chronological narrative. This means of producing space creates a unifying frame through which the diversity of place can be viewed. The trail as narrative is a useful means of conceptualising these tourism products – like a literary text, the trail presents events and

sites in chronological order to make sense of the place and tell a coherent story (Robinson, 2002). A destination is therefore consumed through the unifying topography of the trail, the visitor following real and virtual markers which direct the gaze and manage the experience. Thus, the existence of trails, can bring about what Crang (2006, p. 49) refers to as 'the etching of modern social practices onto the landscape through tourism,' revealing a variety of different semiological geographies (Hughes, 1998). Tourist spaces are therefore increasingly seen as both physically, culturally and symbolically constructed.

## Theming and gazing

The most distinct example of such a constructed space is the themed environment which is a deliberate commodification of space for specifically leisure/tourism oriented consumption. This concept clearly has its basis in the theme park which provides a highly controlled environment where the visitor experience, interpretation, attractions and hospitality are incorporated. This creates what Lukas calls the 'immutable and unifying nature that characterises a theme' (Lukas, 2007, p. 2). Shaw and Williams (2004) have proposed a typology of themed environments, demonstrating the diversity of these unified spaces: they suggest that Theme Parks include nature, heritage, cultural and Disney-type theme parks, Themed Environments comprise malls, restaurants, museums/art galleries and market places whilst Themed Landscapes are spaces deliberately created around specific popular cultural/heritage themes. It is notable that trails have been developed in each of these categories of themed space.

Both Relph's (1976) critique of the *museumisation* of space and Malraux's earlier work, <u>The</u> museum without walls (1967) analyse the transformational encroachment of culture onto public space and these ideas are useful for exploring the creation of themed tourist settings and the subsequent role of the trail within this. Relph's process of museumization refers to the development of spaces where the architecture and features are deliberately outward looking and created for spectators and consumers. This idea relates to the spreading of the museum idiom throughout urban cultural life and is also clearly linked to Malraux's work which explores how artistic reproductions (such as photography) have allowed culture to break free of the museum institution and inhabit the public domain. Later, Featherstone called this the 'aestheticisation' of everyday life (1991, p. 65-82) and Walsh, the 'heritagization' of our daily experience of towns and cities (Walsh, 1992). The post-industrial city has ceased to be a functional centre of production, and instead has developed symbolic cultural spaces for visual appropriation and as the back-drop for more prosaic forms of consumption. The authority of the museum idiom suggests that developments such as the creation of interpretive trails in public spaces may lead to a static and sanitised version of culture rather than one that fully represents local history, industries and communities. The theming that inevitably takes place in these environments can, in Lukas' (2007) view, be a powerful determinant of how visitors view places and Shaw and Williams (2004, p. 267) suggest that 'as post-industrial places are rebranded as new places of spectacle and consumption, the representation of the community becomes narrower.' Thus locales of consumption for some may be spaces of exclusion for others, particularly in the case where spaces of production (e.g. docks and shipyards) have become places of touristic consumption (e.g. marinas, waterfronts and cultural quarters) all of which are commonly interpreted by trails.

Common to all of these ideas on the creation of tourist space is the notion of visual appropriation and Urry's influential concept of the *tourist gaze* (1990, 2002, 2011). In his work, he explores the ocular nature of the tourist experience, the visual consumption of place and, importantly, the means by which the tourism industry organizes and directs this consumption. What is particularly relevant about Urry's concept of the tourist gaze for this particular discussion, is not simply the revelation that tourists like to look at sights, but that the sights they consume are selected, constructed and directed by an increasingly influential tourism industry. Examples of the various means created specifically to direct the tourist gaze include the extensive tourist-organising media of which trails are becoming an increasingly important component.

We have seen that selectivity and a reliance on the visual are inherent features of themed environments and these characteristics are also attributed to trails, particularly as part of a critique of their reliability as interpreters of place (MacLeod, 2004). As Skinner (2015, p. 5) suggests, following a trail is not necessarily an 'expansive' act as to open up one space is to close another. The following examples illustrate how trails use selectivity and tangible cultural elements to underpin political, class-based or ahistorical readings of the landscape they interpret. Wagner and Minca (2015) discuss how these attributes contribute to the process of 'hardening' in their discussion of the creation of the Kasbah Route through southern Morocco. This process involves selecting representative sites to be included on the Route and directing travel along it, thus creating a permanent trail that has been physically consolidated and culturally embedded within a particular way of seeing the region which, in this case, is a European gaze resting on iconic, exotic structures of old Morocco. Thus the Route is 'a linear reading connecting some objects (and at the same time excluding others) and their meaning through the lenses of the colonial mind' (Wagner & Minca, 2015, p.24). The hardening of the route and its cultural ossification is an example of the museumisation process at work. In their analysis of a heritage trail in Newcastle, an Australian suburb, Markwell, Stevenson, and Rowe (2004) also consider the effects of visual selectivity. They report that the outstanding landscape features usually used to create a route tend to be the by-products of dominant middle-class culture in their study-setting, thus making the job of representing other social groups more difficult. In a multi-layered landscape such as the City of David in East Jerusalem, the official trail fails to include the past and present histories of the Palestinian population thus becoming a "co-producer, along with settlers, archaeologists, and tourists, of a landscape important to very particular communities, notably the Israeli settlement movement and the Western tourists seeking out evidence of their own origins" (Taylor, 2015, p. 112). An alternative, informal trail has been created to address the historical and political bias.

A similarly contested example is the Ping Shan Heritage Trail in Hong Kong which is appreciated by overseas visitors seeking a journey through an unchanged, premodern China and domestic tourists pursuing a sense of identity. However, the indigenous Tang clan who owned several sites on this prestigious trail effectively closed it down, believing that it affected the sacred harmony of their ancestral landscape (Cheung, 1999). These examples demonstrate how powerful the dominant representation of a trail can be and the consequent level of resistance that they may engender. Not all trails prompt such responses

but at the very least, a trail can lead to trivialisation as Saretzki suggests in a study of Spanish literary trails which may lead to 'disneyfication' of the cityscape being interpreted (2013, p. 69).

## Trails and the performance of space

Despite these critiques of the trail's potential role in creating mono-cultural, static landscapes of consumption, it is possible to view the interpreted route within a different paradigm, sometimes referred to as the 'performance turn' in tourism studies. The tourist gaze, which appears at first reading to privilege the visual above other senses, has been criticised for its assumption that the act of gazing is a passive one where tourists obediently absorb the dominant sights presented to them (Meethan, 2006). This critical response to Urry's work can be classified as part of the so-called 'performance turn' that tourism studies have recently taken (Johannesson, 2005, p. 136) where tourism is not simply the servicing of acquiescent visitors consuming spectacles created for them by the industry, but is a phenomenon in which tourists experience place through a variety of senses and engagements - thus they are not simply an audience but are actively performing within, and therefore creating, their own tourism experience. The performance turn follows the work of Crouch (2000, 2004, 2013) and Edensor (2000, 2001, 2006) whose analyses of the ways in which tourists 'practise' and 'perform' tourism lead to the theory of the 'embodiment' of space. These concepts afford us a way of exploring tourists' experience of space by emphasising the active nature of tourist engagements, rather than the purely visual. This inhabitation of space, discussed above, is referred to as 'embodied practice' (Crouch 2000, 2004) and many authors have used this idea to pursue analyses of tourist activity which require the body to engage a wider range of senses and competences than the purely visual (Edensor, 2006; Everett, 2008; Perkins & Thorns 2001; Scarles, 2009). The emphasis on a more embodied and engaged experience of tourism is also reflected in research that applies Pine and Gilmore's (1999) 'experience economy' to the field of tourism (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, Mansfeldt, 2008, Mehmetoglu & Engen 2011; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Richards 2001). Many types of visitor attraction have long been concerned with the experiential, promoting an emotional and sensory response to a visit, rather than a purely educational or aesthetic experience. However Richards (2001, p. 62) suggests that even the most didactic attractions, such as museums, have become 'experience factories' within this new economy.

Accordingly, it can be argued that within this paradigm, trails can contribute to a more embodied, experiential engagement with place. The very notion that a trail map directs the gaze and promotes unquestioning consumption of place is challenged by Rossetto (2012) who argues that the presence of a prescriptive map helps to free the user rather than constrict them, giving comfort and competence in a toured environment and encouraging a 'mobile and active' gaze and impromptu behaviours (p. 47). A more embodied trail experience can be deliberately incorporated at the design stage although this approach is not widespread as was found in a survey of UK trails (Hayes and MacLeod, 2007). One of the key characteristics of a trail is to link sites and this can be extended to include more informal, interactive attractions such as events, markets, artists' studios, pubs and street vendors, as Bender notes in his study of the potential of maritime heritage trails to engage visitors on the Adriatic coast (Bender, 2015). Food and wine trails are particularly well-placed to offer opportunities for this type of embodied experience (Slocum, 2015) although the European Institute of Cultural Routes clearly believes that all long-distance routes should incorporate tourist products and experiences and has made their inclusion one of

the conditions for certification as an EU Cultural Route (Ispas, Constantin & Candrea, 2015). A trail developed around the historic core of the city of Saida in Lebanon was reported to have enhanced visitors' engagement with the district (Al-Hagla, 2010) compared with their direct experience of the destination without use of the trail. The host-guest encounters embedded into the trail design played an important role in this heightened experience of place. Clearly therefore, a trail can be more than the sum of its constituent parts – when it encourages visitors to make connections between sites, landscapes and other features of the journey, this interplays with the meditative, embodied practice of walking to encourage active participation as was the case in a walking trail in Epirus in Greece (Merantzas, 2015).

Central to the idea of 'embodiment' is of course the engagement of the senses and trails that encourage users to touch, smell, taste and listen as well as look could profitably be encouraged. Noting the scent of wildflowers, the body's movement, the sounds of a city and the taste of street food will all enhance the experience of a trail. In particular, sound has been found to be an effective interpretive tool. Many trails are now interpreted through mobile applications which are used in situ and provide audio-visual information and mapping. Studies of audio trails in particular emphasise the benefits that this type of interpretation offer in terms of augmented experience and enhanced memory of the journey (Ball, Day, Livergant, & Tivers, 2005; Butler, 2007). Butler refers to the experience of an audio trail along the Thames Path in London that included local history reminiscence as a 'memoryscape', encouraging an 'active, mobile process, connecting often disparate things in an intensely creative way to make sense of our past, present and the future' (Butler, 2007, p. 369). Mobile applications and scannable QR (Quick Response) codes also provide independent, unobtrusive interpretation as in the case of an art trail at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, where the associated stories, people and themes were conveyed through QR codes, enhancing the enjoyment of users (Wolff, Mulholland, Maguire, & O'Donovan, 2014).

Inevitably, a trail is only a suggested route and there are visitors who will resist instructions, sabotage itineraries and subvert the hegemonic message of a themed route and indeed trails have been designed to encourage visitors to select elements of a story and compare historical themes with contemporary street culture (Shaw & MacLeod, 2000). Alternative trails can be offered as in the case of the City of David where an unofficial guidebook and tour are offered that challenge the signage, include the views of local residents and focus on a more critical approach to the complex history of Jerusalem than that presented in the official trail (Taylor, 2015). Such 'resistance strategies' at tourist trails have received little critical attention but would certainly repay further study as Taylor suggests (2015, p. 118).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that trails and routes are increasingly commonplace tourism products that have remained under-theorised within the academic literature. In this article, it has been suggested that trails possess characteristics that may lead to the further theming and museumisation of the tourist spaces they inhabit, creating static places of consumption aimed outwardly at the visitor economy. However, through the use of recent examples to illustrate the performance turn in tourism studies, the article goes on to propose that trails can be utilised to increase visitors' and local communities' appreciation and active engagement with places. In particular, the flexibility of trails to incorporate both tangible and more experiential place-based features in their story-telling is highlighted, suggesting

that these popular attractions can contribute to a much more nuanced and rewarding experience of place. Trails are multi-faceted constructs that would benefit from more scholarly attention to their socio-cultural significance for tourism and wider society. More specifically for the purposes of this article, further research is also required to understand the lived experience of visitors as they engage with these popular connective attractions and to use this knowledge to further enhance the use of trails in the landscape.

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