

## Tourism Sites As Signs

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## **Tourism Sites As Signs**

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Theme: macro-level research

or

Methodological approach: trends in basic tourism research

# TOURISM SITES AS SIGNS

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of this year's conference is "Seeing the Forest AND the Trees – Big Picture Research in a Detail Driven World." Few aspects of tourism research are more "big picture" than tourism theory, the subject of this paper. Within tourism theory, it is common to distinguish between two halves of the tourism whole: the tourist experience and the tourism site. This paper will adopt that distinction, but will focus on the tourism site as the central point of tourism. This focus is a response to the habit of much of the tourism literature that takes the site, more or less, as given when, in fact, it is central to tourism.

In what follows we first present an argument about the nature of tourism sites before turning to a consideration of how tourists cognize those sites. We explicitly consider the case of repeat visits to a site in which the tourist moves from "outsider" to positions increasingly characterized by the position of "insider." This movement is then illustrated using the experience of the senior author at one site in Copenhagen, Denmark before closing with some concluding observations.

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

At the most general level tourism is the interaction of tourists with a tourism site that is, in some way, emblematic of the host society. The tourists in question may be domestic tourists or they may be outlanders. Either way they are behaving as tourists; which is to say they are engaged in an activity that is not what they do in their everyday lives and they are, as a result, in a state of heightened sensibility.

Let us for the moment foreground the tourist site. Here, the way forward leans heavily on critical theory. In any given place, there are hundreds and perhaps thousands of sites that could be elevated to the status of "tourism site," yet only a small percentage are so elevated. It is usually the case that some elite, often a convention and visitors board, makes the choice as to what is and what is not to be representative of place as a "tourism site." Thus it is fair to say that tourism sites serve some purpose within some larger narrative. Put succinctly, tourism sites have an ideological function (Light, 2001).

Returning to the tourist experience, Metro-Roland (2009) and MacCannell (1999) before her argued powerfully in favor of a Peircean semiotic understanding of the tourist experience. In this formulation, the tourist confronts the tourism site (or object in the Peircean sense) as a sign, which triggers an image in the mind (the representamen) which must then be made sense of. The process of making sense involves the contrasting of the mental image with accumulated experience so that an interpretation of the sign (in this case the tourism site) can be made. This interpretation in turn leads to an action, often but not always a verbal articulation, which may be appropriate or not. Inappropriate actions have the potential to lead to tourist embarrassment and that embarrassment to learning via reinterpretation. MacCannell (1999) refers to this as "truth marking."

Now consider two archetypical tourists at a tourism site: the domestic tourist and the foreign tourist. Consider first the case of the domestic tourist at the tourism site. The domestic tourist, in most cases, interprets the tourism site correctly and acts appropriately. No learning takes place because the tourist, as a *domestic* tourist, is imbedded within the host society.

Consider a second case where a foreign tourist incorrectly interprets the sign and acts inappropriately. In some cases this leads to sanction (formal such as reprimand or informal such as shunning) and ultimately to learning. Alternatively, tourists can “get it half right”, through efforts at interpretation, including the consideration of tacit and codified knowledge. For example, it is not uncommon to mistake a government building for a church, since to Western eyes these two types of buildings may have aesthetic similarities (Knudsen, Rickly-Boyd and Metro-Roland, 2011). Luckily, reverence is as appropriate in a government building (such as the U.S. Capitol) as it is in a church.

Consider, finally, the repeat visit foreign tourist. Logically, such a tourist occupies the place of the foreign tourist above on the first visit, but moves asymptotically closer to the domestic tourist with return visits over time as each repeated visit is an opportunity for knowledge gain (see Light, 1996; Kullback and Liebler, 1951).

### A SHORT ILLUSTRATION

We next illustrate this idea with a case study drawn from field work in Denmark by the senior author. The senior author first visited Denmark when holding a Fulbright there in 1995 and he returned to engage in field work there in summer 1997 and each summer from 2000 through 2009. We use an autoethnographic approach (Scarles, 2010; Besio and Butz, 2004) that is reflective of three encounters with a particular tourism site: the Amalienborg Palace complex in Copenhagen.

The Amalienborg Palace complex is located just east of the center of Copenhagen. The complex consists of a large octagonal “square” with identical palaces on four of the eight sides. In the center of the octagon is an equestrian statue of Frederik V, the king who commissioned the building of the palaces for four of his Privy Council members in 1750. The palaces were first occupied by the Crown in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and have functioned as the city home of the monarchy periodically since that time and continuously since 1850.

I clearly remember the first time I stood in Amalienborg Square in Copenhagen. It was February and having left work earlier than usual, I had decided to go see the place before catching the bus home. It was mid-afternoon, but the winter sky was already growing dark. The sky, the buildings and the street were gray. I was overwhelmed by the ordinariness of the place. A Jaguar XJ6 pulled up near one of the buildings. The queen got out, cigarette in hand, and went into one of the buildings. The car pulled away. I had seen what there is to see at Amalienborg – the queen – and I trudged toward the bus stop. A few days later while at lunch with Danish colleagues, I mentioned my trip to Amalienborg and that I’d seen the queen. My comments on the ordinariness of the experience were met by stony silence by my colleagues. I later learned that one (and especially a foreigner) doesn’t have opinions about the queen – **1995**.

A little more than five years later, I found myself again at Amalienborg. It was June and the tourist season was in full swing. To the east, the cruise ships had docked that morning and disgorged their hundreds of passengers who were now making their way through Amalienborg toward the shopping street to the west. Some, like me, had come to see the changing of the guard. I had come with a Danish friend who knew one of the guards. The royal standard was absent from the palaces, meaning the queen and her family were away at their summer palace to the north. It was then for the first time that I recognized the symbolic arrangement of the place – four identical Baroque/Rococo palaces surrounding the equestrian statue which faced north to the church commissioned by Frederik V, the same person who commissioned the palaces. My Danish friend smiled when I told her of my discovery. – **2000**.

Two summers ago, in July, I spent the better part of four days at Amalienborg. I know the current names of the four palaces, I know their original names and I know which architect built what. I know that Frederik

V, who commissioned the palaces, was a “sado-masochistic dipsomaniac” and that he died young in a fall from his horse while riding at full speed through woods drunk and in the dark. More importantly, in the past fifteen years I have learned much about Margrette II, the current queen. I know that she is an artist, translator, costumer, film and television actress, head of state and head of church. I know that she speaks French around the house and that she worries about her children and is delighted by her grandchildren. I know that she loves to go skiing in Norway with her sister. I bow ever so slightly when her car passes me in the street. – 2009.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have first argued that tourism sites are representative of places and that, as such, they function ideologically. We then approach the issue of tourist experience and note that Peircean semiotics suggests that we make sense of what we see while on tour by drawing on our previous experiences. If we then define the spectrum of possible responses to a tourism site as having endpoints occupied by, at one end, the foreign, first-time tourist and at the other end the (fully interpellated) domestic tourist, then the repeat-visitor foreign tourist moves with each return to the site from position of first-time tourist toward that occupied by the domestic tourist.

There are several implications of this notion of a spectrum. First, this explains how tourists learn by touring (thereby accumulating social capital). Second, it suggests that this learning is potentially enhanced by repeat visits since it contains opportunity, through learning, for even further inclusion into the host society. Finally, this suggests a rationale for repeat visiting that may be more complex than the simple “satisfaction” that stems from a desire to be, in Cohn’s (1999) terminology, dual-centered.

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