3 Neolocalism, Tourism and Shiplap

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Abstract

As homogenization has led to increased feelings of placelessness and rootlessness, neolocalism offers the opportunity to reconnect with place through nostalgia, rebranding, and marketing of narrative, culture, and heritage through consumption, as well as increasing opportunities for locals. While, conceptually, neolocalism embraces the triple bottom line of sustainability, eclipsing economic interests can give way to a conflicting reality. In this chapter, Magnolia Market at the Silos in Waco, Texas will be highlighted as an example of what can happen when the triple bottom line is sacrificed in favor of economic gain. This renovated complex in a formerly rundown area of Waco has been a financial boon to local tourism related interests while other businesses have faced financial ruin and closure. The aim of this chapter is to expand on established ideas about neolocalism and discuss its relationship to tourism, using the example of the Silos, by proposing and exploring the elements that comprise neolocalism.

Introduction

In this chapter on neolocalism, Magnolia Market at the Silos (the Silos), the brainchild of Waco, Texas, USA entrepreneurs, Chip and Joanna Gaines, will be explored. As hosts of the series *Fixer Upper*, a home renovation series that became an unexpected hit for Home and Garden Television (HGTV), they were inspired to renovate a 2-acre complex in a run-down area of downtown Waco. The complex, which opened in October 2015, houses shops, a bakery, food trucks, and a large plaza complete with picnic tables and benches where families can eat, rest, mingle, and play.

During the first year, over 1.9 million visitors visited Waco to experience the Silos and what it has to offer (Waco History, n.d.). By the second quarter of 2017, hotels in Waco reached 75% occupancy (Country Living, 2016). It is estimated the Silos attracts up to 1.6 million visitors each year with the demand for parking so intense the city added the Silo District Trolley. The popularity of the Silos led to increased attendance at other Waco attractions as well (Burney, 2017). The Gaines are responsible for much of the economic revitalisation Waco is currently experiencing (Halkias, 2017). In short, neolocalism, tourism, and shopping combined to revitalise a city experiencing a lagging economy and a lackadaisical tourist market.

My own history with Waco began in 1967; I lived in the area for 6 years and have returned to visit many times. April of 2018 was my first visit in 12 years, and I found myself wide-eyed at the changes in the downtown area as a result of the Silos. While, as of this writing, there is no available documentation as to specific neolocal principles applied to the development of the complex, many of the principles of neolocalism are evident. However, it was also clear that profit was valued over the triple bottom line of sustainability.

The purpose of this chapter is to incorporate and expand on established ideas about neolocalism and discuss its relationship to tourism. Central to this discussion is the paradox of neolocalism, which while, conceptually, embraces the triple bottom line of sustainability, can, in reality, lead to a conflicting set of results that endow/disenfranchise, empower/disempower and/or liberate/stereotype. The discussion will begin with neolocalism, then segue into brief discussions on place, destination branding and marketing, narratives, the commodification of culture, heritage, symbolic consumption and shopping, and finally, the triple bottom line of sustainability. These themes will then be discussed through the example of the Silos, to be followed by areas for future research and concluding comments.

Understanding the neolocal in tourism

Neolocalism has been embraced as a developing form of tourism as more tourists seek out 'authentic' travel experiences by delving into the 'local' (Mody & Koslowsky, 2019) instead of indulging the tourist gaze when traveling (Wearing et al., 2009). Neolocalism can be understood as a socially constructed idea of place based on a combination of

factors, such as historical contexts, nostalgia, and destination marketing, with specific aspects of a locale highlighted and promoted based on the potential for consumption. Burr (2015) argues the primary assumption of social constructionism is that knowledge and understanding are based on human thought, language, and interaction rather than an observable and definable reality. These overlapping concepts provide a pathway to understanding neolocalism as a socially constructed reassertion of reality based on human experience and nostalgia – a desire to recapture a perceived history within a contemporary context – as a way to fend off or repair an increasing sense of rootlessness and loss of sense of place. Or, more simply, the commodification and consumption of 'local' and what it has to offer via the rebranding of place – which is often based on carefully chosen narratives that can omit and/or reframe troublesome and distasteful past events.

As of this writing, research into neolocalism has explored microbreweries (Eberts, 2014; Schnell & Reese, 2003; Slocum et al., 2018), social, environmental, and community resilience (Klink & Denaldi, 2012; Parnwell, 2007; Wilson, 2012), and a variety of other areas (see for example, Brain, 2011; Litzky et al., 2017; Sipe, 2019). Exploring the 'local' in destinations via neolocal tourism remains largely unexamined (Mody & Koslowsky, 2019). While the 'deliberate seeking out of regional lore and local attachment' (Shortridge, 1996: 10) in the quest for 'authentic' experiences has become popular with tourists seeking to avoid the pitfalls of traditional mass tourism, the reality of neolocalism is much more complex. While participation in neolocalism can be viewed as a form of resistance to homogenisation and rootlessness, any notion that neolocal tourism is an answer to mass tourism can and should be met with scepticism (Mody & Koslowsky, 2019).

While neolocal tourism development is increasing, it is not always the result of strategic policy and planning. Mody and Koslowsky (2019) contend that many destinations are unprepared for the introduction of neolocal tourism, which can result in a variety of issues including loss of place identity for locals, overcrowding, and increased security concerns. Loss of place identity and community are often the result of travellers seeking out 'authentic' experiences (Mody & Koslowsky, 2019), which can also create long-term housing shortages when local residences are turned into short-term tourist accommodations (Longhi, 2019). Haphazard and unplanned development of this nature can lead to the negative impacts associated with mass tourism (Mody & Koslowsky, 2019).