The Tourist Experience of Heritage Urban Spaces: Valletta as a Case Study

Ebejer, J., Smith, A., Maitland, R. and Stevenson, N.

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Tourism Planning & Development, DOI: 10.1080/21568316.2019.1683886.

The final definitive version is available online:

https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1683886

The tourist experience of heritage urban spaces: Valletta as a case study

John Ebejer, Andrew Smith, Nancy Stevenson & Robert Maitland

Abstract: This article provides an understanding of how tourists experience heritage urban spaces by investigating features that influence tourist experiences most. It is framed within urban design literature which refers to three elements of urban space namely physical setting (or form), activity and meaning. These elements are used to explore how urban spaces are experienced by tourists. Its findings are derived from an in-depth qualitative analysis of interviews with tourists to Valletta, Malta. The research suggests that the intrinsic qualities of the space are relevant to the tourist experience but what is even more relevant are the interactions of the tourist with different elements within that space, namely interactions with surroundings, interactions with others and interactions with self/meaning. Within this broad conceptual model, the research identifies important sub-themes. Some of these reinforce the findings of existing work on tourist experiences, but others are often under-estimated or neglected.

Keywords: tourist experience, heritage spaces, urban heritage, place, Valletta (Malta)

For peer reviewed article as published refer to journal Tourism Planning and Development, 2019..

Introduction

When visiting a new area or urban space, people sometimes experience something that cannot be explained by the physical properties or sensory perception. Montgomery (1998, p. 94) points out that "It is a relatively easy task to think of a successful place… but it is much more difficult to know why a place is successful." This research investigates features and aspects of urban spaces that most influence the experiences of tourists. It borrows from urban design literature that refers to three elements of urban space namely physical setting (or form), activity and meaning. These three aspects help us understand how urban spaces are experienced by people. In urban design texts, even if there is an implied understanding that users of these spaces will include both residents and tourists, rarely is there an explicit reference to the tourist experience. This research will examine how far form, activity and meaning help to develop understanding of the tourist experience. These elements will be examined, separately and in combination, with particular reference to tourist experiences and urban heritage spaces. For the purpose of this paper, urban heritage is understood to be buildings and urban spaces that have associations with an area and that have value to people because of their history.

The research focuses on Valletta, a fortified historic city with a rich heritage and many layers of history and cultural influences (Bramwell, 2007, Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2004). It is the National capital, situated on a peninsula and has clear boundaries defined by lines of fortifications and the shoreline. It is small, with an area of less than a square kilometre and a population of around 6,500 (Smith and Ebejer, 2012) but as a National capital it is a place where transport, commercial, administrative and financial and tourism activities are concentrated (Smith, 2010). It offers urban spaces that are diverse in shape, size, outlook and building form (Ebejer, 2013) and is popular with tourists to Malta, 91% of whom spend some time in the City (Sultana & Attard, 2016). Valletta's rich urban heritage and historic narrative makes it ideal for the development of a more culture-oriented tourism (Ebejer, 2018). The

concentration of attractions and heritage spaces and substantial tourist activity make it suitable for a study of how heritage urban spaces influence the visitor experience.

The birth and development of Valletta is closely linked to the history of the Knights of St John in Malta. Valletta was built using the financial support received from European nobility following the Great Siege of 1565. It is therefore seen to be the city of the Knights, as well as one that is Maltese. The Knights of St John was a military order with its members coming from the richest families from across Europe. The urban fabric of Valletta conveys both a Maltese identity as well as an international one (Smith and Ebejer, 2012). A monumental architecture of palaces and public buildings dominates the cityscape. These are visible reminders of the Knights of St John, who ruled Malta 1530 - 1798. Concurrently distinctive timber balconies, the extensive use of Maltese stone and other typical Maltese architectural features characterise Valletta's streetscapes. Valletta also bears the imprint of British colonial rule (1800 - 1964), although British references are less evident than those associated with the Knights. The transition from a British colony to an independent state took place in a peaceful manner (Baldacchino, 2009). This allowed for a generally positive attitude of Maltese towards the British. The continued good relations between Malta and Britain were further sustained as both are members of the EU and of the Commonwealth.

In the text below, reference is made to Pjazza Regina and Pjazza San Gorg, two adjoining squares at the geographic centre of Valletta, surrounded by significant historic buildings, monuments and heritage attractions. The text also refers to the Upper Barrakka Garden, a small public park located on the fortifications, offering panoramic views of the Grand Harbour. All three public spaces are very popular with Maltese as well as tourists and are within a few minutes walk of many of Valletta's main visitor attractions.

Experiencing urban space

Experience is a complex and hard-to-define phenomenon (Andereck et al, 2006). Visitors experience of places are multi-layered and influenced by a complex range of physical, social, cultural, economic and personal variables. Experiences involve the mind, emotions and a mixture of active participation, passive gazing and social interaction (Govers and Go, 2009). Griffin and Hayllar (2007, p. 13) note how a tourism area that offers opportunities for different 'layers' of experience" can be experienced in different ways by different people. Hayes and Macleod (2007, p. 48) discuss the experiences of place, noting how visitors are: ".... invited to 'explore' and to 'discover' for themselves: personally to find surprises or 'hidden' worlds, to seek adventure, to admire grandeur, to share secrets, to sample flavours and to uncover mysteries …" Loeffler (2004) refers to "significant and profound effects" that the outdoor experience has on individuals and categorises them under three themes. The first she refers to as 'inner exploration' and as 'self-discovery'. The second is 'connections with others' or 'attachment to friends/group'. The third relates to 'the close interaction with the natural environment' or 'spiritual connection with the outdoors'.

Some places are part of the tourism itinerary because they are associated with powerful stories (Chronis, 2012) and tourism experiences of those places are dependent on the availability and communication of narratives. For many tourists, history and narrative are dominant in the experience of a historic area. Narratives of place are not always grounded in historical fact, but for most tourist sites it is the idea of 'history' and their position within it that provides the narrative and the meaning that visitors find interesting.

To better understand how places are experienced, urban design writers have put forward a model involving three elements that are interrelated and combine to create a sense of place namely physical characteristics of spaces (form), activities taking place there (activity) and the meanings inherent in them (meaning). Though commonplace in urban design literature (Relph,

1976; Canter, 1977; Punter, 1991; Montgomery, 1998; Gustafson, 2001 and Carmona et al., 2010), only Pearce, (2005) refers to form, activity and meaning framing as a way to analyse the tourism experience. Carmona et al. (2010) note that the significance of the physicality of places is often overstated and argue that activities and meaning may be as, or more important, in creating a sense of place. Form, activity and meaning are amplified upon in the next sections.

Form

Form refers to the physical setting and to all that is tangible in the context of the tourist experience. People interact with their physical setting gathering information about the environment around them through the senses. Although vision provides most information, the senses constantly reinforce each other to extend and broaden sensory perception allowing a wider appreciation of the surroundings (Carmona et al, 2010). Wunderlich (2008) notes how people engage their senses when walking in urban places. Physical movement through space, together with sight, enable people to understand places as 'three-dimensional entities' and develop a strong feeling for spatial qualities with a "sense of direction, geometry, perspective and scale" (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 128). People can best appreciate the city's aesthetics if they are pedestrians, walking through spaces in relaxed and irregular rhythms (Burns, 2000). Macleod (2017) notes how trails create a sequence of sites to be visited and in doing so creates a sense of order in the way the tourist experiences the surroundings. A route within an urban area becomes a linear visitor attraction that creates a unifying frame through which the diversity of space can be viewed.

Peoples' interaction with form is also noted by Lynch (1960) who contends that people mentally organise the environment into a coherent image, one that enables them to move about easily and quickly through urban spaces. He identifies five key physical elements that support legibility of urban spaces namely paths, nodes, landmarks, districts and edges. Nodes are

where paths converge. Landmarks can be seen from different angles and from afar, normally over the top of other smaller structures. Their form and/or size makes them unique and easily recognisable. Districts are areas that are bound by a common theme by reason of building type, uses or some other characteristic. Edges may be barriers, more or less penetrable that define an area and distinguishes it from surrounding areas. Although working in the field of urban design, Lynch also contributed to tourism studies in terms of method (such as the use of cognitive maps) and concept (including an emphasis on the meaning of place and on the sensory qualities of well-designed environments) (Pearce and Fagence, 1996). On the basis of Lynch's work, Sinha and Sharma (2009) propose measures how the environmental image of an area can be made stronger including clarifying pathways, enhancing node prominence, developing districts, strengthening edges and preserving the singularity of landmarks.

Orbasli (2000) notes how old urban cores evolve over time; the form, scale and materials of a building reflecting the time it was built. Street widths in historic cores are often variable; a mix of alleyways, wider roads and piazzas is often the case. According to Orbasli (2000, p. 55); "In historic towns the primary attraction is the narrow, winding 'cobbled' streets, captured vistas, glimpses through urban fabric, texture created by architectural facades, open squares, a piazza or river front." Ashworth (1995, p. 270) refers to "a mix of preserved buildings, conserved cityscapes and morphological patterns, as well as place association with historical events" as the place where tourism activities occur. Maitland and Smith (2009) claim that to some extent the desire to impress tourists has always influenced urban design because they experience buildings and cities aesthetically.

Activity

Activity refers to the presence of people in urban spaces. Urban design literature emphasises the importance of activity to make urban spaces enjoyable. Urban spaces are inherently social since when two or more people are together in the same space there is a social contact, even if there is no verbal exchange. Carmona et al. (2010, p. 99) note that: "Successful public spaces are characterised by the presence of people, in an often self-reinforcing process." Henning (2012) refers to the 'dialogic nature of experience' and explains that there is a commonality that is shared by people who are in the same situation. For example, there is a commonality between tourists in, say, a pedestrian street where there is a predominance of tourism activity. Gehl (1987) describes the opportunity to see, hear, and meet others as one of the most important attractions in city centres and on pedestrian streets. In this 'people-watching', non-verbal communication becomes central to the experience - an activity that happens at open-air cafés, along pedestrian roads and in shopping streets. The presence of local people in an area is a positive tourist element because tourists wish to have encounters with locals or to have opportunities to observe and learn something about their ways of life (Griffin and Hayllar, 2007).

Rather than 'activity' or 'presence of people', Montgomery (1998) uses the term 'vitality' that refers to the number of people across different times of day and night, as well as the number of cultural events over the year and the presence of an active street life. Vitality of an urban space is dependent in part on the diversity of uses in the buildings around the space and within the urban space itself. Montgomery argues that without 'transactions' spaces become lifeless and it is a wide range of uses that make these 'transactions' possible. Transactions or 'exchanges' could be of "information, friendship, material goods, culture, knowledge, insight, skills and also the exchange of emotional, psychological and spiritual support." (Montgomery, 1998, p. 97).

Bødker and Browning (2012) argue that the mundane practices, routines and activities of locals are an important part of the experiential landscape for tourism. Tourists interact with networks of local people, from those specifically involved in delivering tourist services to the more fleeting interactions with locals whose everyday lives are lived in the locations the tourists are visiting. Maitland (2009) contends that some tourists deliberately seek out everyday life and local people as they consider these constitute the 'real city'. Tourists may move away from the 'enclavic tourist space' and seek out the 'heterogeneous tourist space' - multi-purpose spaces where a wide range of activities and people co-exist.

Meaning

Whereas physical setting and activities are more obviously manifested in a place, meaning is more difficult to grasp (Relph, 1976). The meanings attached to buildings, spaces and artefacts are subjective and can be read differently by different people. Meaning is derived from the interactive processes between the individual, the setting and the broader social world (Sancar and Severcan, 2010). The role of meaning in the tourist experience varies. Cohen (1979) developed a typology of tourist experiences based on meaning. He presents them in an ascending order from the most 'superficial' motivated by 'pleasure' to the most 'profound' motivated by the search for meaning. Social and cultural practices produce cultural landscapes that are redolent with meaning (Maitland and Smith, 2009). The urban context is a repository of social and cultural significance, as well as the embodiment of a collective memory (Berleant, 2003). To the visitor, the cultural object may represent values, symbolic meanings and created associations (McIntosh, 1999). One such association can be historical, derived from events (Wearing and Wearing, 1996) although an event does not necessarily make the space in which it occurred historically meaningful (Sather-Wagstaff, 2008). The meaning of a place is often acquired from comparisons, similarities and differences with other places (Gustafson, 2001).

Henning (2012) argues that in the tourism experience people are seeking the difference and not necessarily the objective authentic. The meanings of buildings, spaces and artefacts are heavily influenced by the tourist's own cultural and social background (Wearing, 1996). The meanings created by visitors are shaped by their own memories, interests and concerns as much as by the encounter with the attraction (Voase, 2002).

The meaning of place is also constructed and sustained by means of webs of stories and narratives produced by people (Rickly Boyd, 2009). Moscardo (2010) argues that stories and themes are critical elements in the understanding of the tourist experience. According to Jamal and Hollinshead (2001, p. 73); "There are no stories waiting to be told and no certain truths waiting to be recorded; there are only stories yet to be constructed." Narratives are 'constructed' by people and they may, or may not, be based on historical fact. More importantly, heritage narratives are stories that people tell about themselves, about others and about the past. Human activity is rooted in place and therefore narratives about people are also narratives about places. Fagence (2017) explores how the story of a historical character transforms a landscape into a viable tourism product in the shape of a heritage-based trail. Through narratives, localities are staged as tourist destinations and are communicated through guidebooks, brochures and various other forms of media representations (Chronis, 2015).

The combination of lived experience with myth produces a uniquely personal tourist narrative (Rickly Boyd, 2009) which may further support and reinforce the tourist's experience of place. A successful heritage tourism product is an interpretation of the local history or narrative which resonates with the historical experience of the tourist or visitor (Rickly Boyd, 2009). For some tourists, part of the experience involves understanding 'how life really was'. Life conditions that might be unthinkable in the present day can be 'experienced', or more fully understood and appreciated, through the narrative (Chronis, 2012).

Study methods

This research adopts a phenomenological approach to enable a deeper understanding of the lived experience of a heritage urban space. Drawing from ideas in the experience literature we started from the basis that the people involved in a leisure or tourism situation are best placed to describe and explain their experiences in their own words. Peoples' tourism experiences arise from a combination of ever-evolving thoughts, emotions and attitudes (Connell and Meyer, 2004) which develop and change over time (Botterill and Crompton, 1996). In this context it was decided to interview people who were on holiday in Malta - while their experiences of visiting Valletta were fresh in their mind. A qualitative methodology was adopted based on face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews to reveal tourists' subjective thoughts and attitudes about their experience during their visit to Valletta. A pilot survey was carried out and different approaches to recruit participants were tested. After permission was granted by the organisations involved, participants were recruited in the public areas of hotels. Four hotels (3* and 5*) were chosen in different locations (one within walking distance of from Valletta; the other three about a half-hour bus ride away). This meant a range of different socio-economic groups were involved in the study. Tourists were approached in a public area of the hotel between 7pm and 9pm, and asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed for research purposes. At this time, people often sat in the lobby to pass the time or to have a drink before or after dinner. On average one in every two people approached agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews were conducted in English, which limited the range of potential participants. The majority of interviewees were British and several tourists declined participation because they felt unable to communicate comfortably in English. In communicating feelings and emotions of the experience, effective verbal communication was essential. Although this is a

limitation of the research, 30 per cent of Malta inbound tourists are British (Malta Tourism Authority, 2015), helping to justify this national focus.

Most of the interviewees were over sixty. Although this may seem high, it is not atypical given that the average age of British tourists to Malta is on the high side at 57 years. In addition, the interviews were carried out in the off peak season, when retired people are more likely to take overseas holidays. Also it was noted that older people tended to stay in the public areas of the hotel whereas younger people were more likely to go elsewhere in the evening. The interview style adopted was conversational - encompassing follow up questions based on answers used to elicit more information. Interviews were not just conversations; but were conversations with a purpose, involving active listening, full attention, interaction, clarification and feedback (Jennings, 2005). The conversation went well beyond a mere description of activities and places as the interviewer actively sought to identify the feelings and emotions of the tourist during their Valletta experience. In instances where interviewees had their cameras with them they were invited to share and refer to their photographs during the interview. A total of 32 in-depth interviews were conducted. Most of the interviews were carried out with couples. The decision to interview couples as well as individuals was a pragmatic one. It would have been impractical to request partners to wait until the interview was concluded. In any case, many tourists do not experience the world through a solitary gaze but in the company of partners, friends and family members (Ek et al 2008:125). Interviewing couples enhanced the conversational dynamic of the interview as people reflected upon their experiences together.

All interviews were transcribed, then read and re-read to develop the researcher's familiarity with the data. Qualitative research software (NVivo 10) was used to organise the process and ensure thorough data analysis. With the aid of the software, the research derived 8 generic themes, (physical features, locations, perceptions/sensory, activities, emotive, people,

services and others). This was in line with concept-driven coding (Gibbs 2007: 45) whereby categories or thematic ideas are identified. Each theme encompassed subsidiary codes and sub-codes, with 163 codes/ sub-codes created in total. Codes included 'things' that impinged on the experience of the tourist like streets and buildings, but also more intangible influences like stories, activities, events, interactions, views, histories, memories, relationships, personal background and so on. Transcripts were analysed to link text extracts to specific themes/codes/sub-codes and nearly a thousand linkages were identified. This process often involved reviewing initial codes to ensure they sufficiently represented the views elicited. The research results as presented in this paper are based on the identified linkages between transcript text on the one hand and theme/code/sub-code linkages on the other. The large amount of data produced was reduced to a manageable form by organising material into three broad themes that represented the different types of interactions namely with surroundings, with other people and with self. Within these themes were related sub-themes; and these themes / sub- themes are outlined further in the next sections.

Findings

In the literature review of this paper, we considered how the form, activity and meaning of urban spaces are relevant to the tourist experience. The research carried out in Valletta takes the discussion a step further. It suggests that the analysis of the tourist experience goes beyond a consideration of form, activity and meaning and is more related to the interaction of the tourist with each element. The discussion below resonates with form, activity and meaning but highlights interactions between the tourist and their surroundings, with other people and with self.

The interactions of the tourist with the surroundings

The research data sheds light on the role of visual interest in tourist experiences. Interviewees talked about views over attractive landscapes or seascapes which were sought after and identified as contributing to positive experiences. Many interviewees talked about Upper Barrakka Gardens, a place from where they could have good views over the Grand Harbour. In contrast, there were no specific comments on the beauty or visual interest of the exterior of individual buildings. One possibility is that tourists to Valletta are not much interested in the external visual qualities of individual buildings and derive their experience of urban form from collections of buildings and spaces. Another possibility is that many people find it difficult to discuss the visual qualities of individual buildings and this is illustrated in this study where only one person, a sculptor, has the specific interest and literacy to engage in a detailed discussion of form.

Apart from an interest in key sites of symbolic value, the research suggests that many tourists to Valletta were also eager to physically engage in the space by exploring and discovering unfamiliar settings. Their visual interest was not limited to the everyday elements but also referred to the overall context of the streetscape. In this study the totality of the historic streetscape was more likely to generate the tourist's interest than the intrinsic visual qualities of individual buildings. The exception was where the visual element combined with the meaning of a building or site, in which case the building and its associated meaning were very relevant and enhanced the tourist experience. For example, one interviewee noted how the form of a memorial to the Royal Airforce, with a phoenix at the top of a column, reflected the meaning. His visual interest was accentuated by the understanding and attribution of significance to the form, thus entailing a deeper connection and more intense emotions and feelings. This highlights the inherent links between form and meaning.

As a capital city Valletta is symbolically rich and its monumental effect is achieved through layout of urban spaces, style of architecture and significance of buildings (Maitland, 2009). Smith (2009) associates Valletta's monumentality with its role as a tourism destination. However in this research, the interviewees referred mostly to features that for Maltese people are commonplace and mundane, rather than to monumental buildings. They spoke about doorways, timber balconies, stone features, streetscapes and stepped streets whereas the structures normally featured on tourist maps and itineraries were rarely mentioned. Fortifications were mentioned a few times, sometimes for their symbolic significance and sometimes as elements of the overall cityscape. St. John's Cathedral was mentioned in several interviews but mostly for its interior, rather than its monumentality in the urban space. The findings support Rickly-Boyd and Metro-Roland's (2010) claim that it is the commonplace, mundane features, and not the more symbolic attractions, that provide the 'seductive' aspects of place. While the power of the monumental remains strong in the tourist imagination, the lived experience of tourists appears to rest heavily upon actual encounters with common features in the streetscape. Many of our interviewees visited some key sites of symbolic value, but most of their experience of the city was derived from their movement through unfamiliar areas.

When describing their experience, survey participants often referred to Valletta's 'character' which related to various physical features including old buildings, balconies and stonework for some. For others, it was the combination of narrow streets and high buildings that created a pleasant atmosphere. Visually Valletta's streets initially seemed very similar to each other but on closer inspection they were found to be quite different and this diversity meant that people saw something different around every corner. The character of a place also included aspects that one might consider to be negative. One interviewee noted "When you get on the side streets you see the almost neglected old buildings with the plaster falling off

and the woodwork paint peeling – that would cause some people to think they don't like it, but to my mind that's the natural Valletta – that's how it is. That's the real Valletta I remember and picture", arguing that when you 'spruce up' an area you risk losing its authenticity.

Some noted how Valletta's character was very much the combination of the present and past. Others noted how the activity of the central commercial area contrasted with the quieter residential streets. The predominant features forming character that emerged from the research data include the historic context, visually interesting features and no two streets appearing to be the same. Interviewees associated the uniqueness of Valletta's history with its unique urban fabric which meant it was perceived to be unlike other Mediterranean cities. Discussion of this uniqueness was often framed by comparisons with interviewees' hometown or with other places. Features mentioned that made Valletta seem unique included the integration of important buildings into the streetscape, the architectural styles, the building elements, the city edges as defined by fortifications and the way the Mediterranean light brought out the vibrant colours of the historic facades. The ever-present sea was another feature that added to Valletta's perceived uniqueness creating "the whole ambience of the city".

The tourist experience is influenced by movement and this can come about in one of two ways – through movement in the surroundings, while the tourist is static, watching and observing or alternatively movement of the tourist as they traverse the city. Several interviewees referred to movement as they experienced Valletta noting how this made their experience more interesting. Examples of the movements in the surroundings were identified and included ships within the harbour, water in the fountain in Pjazza San Gorg and other people in the pedestrian streets. Interviewees' comments suggested that a dynamic scene is more interesting than a static one.

Another form of movement occurs when the viewer moves through their surroundings. Motion provides another layer to the experience of the city and Stevenson and Farrell (2017)

contend that the physical sensations associated with traversing a path and avoiding obstacles can widen the broad sensory experience and change their focus to the micro environment. The micro-environment was identified by some interviewees and included an awareness and appreciation of the steepness of steps. Wunderlich (2008) associates the experience of walking through the city with the development of a three dimensional understanding of its geometry and scale. This was apparent as interviewees wandered through the streets encountering views and vistas, combined with the experience of small scale features and the mundane elements of the city.

Our findings suggest that the element of surprise impinges on the tourist experience more than is generally acknowledged in academic literature. Suvantola (2002, p.180) notes that the "most intense aesthetic experience of nature" is likely to catch one by surprise. He explains this with his own delightful experience of 'discovering' a small waterfall after a couple of hours of strenuous walking. In Valletta the tourist experience involved walking around and exploring the historic streets and piazzas. This resulted in the discovery of elements and features that were new to the tourist; for example an interesting doorway or an architectural feature on the façade of a building. When something new or different was discovered, interviewees expressed surprise and in this context surprise was associated with a more intense and enjoyable experience. For example some interviewees met with unexpected features when walking and exploring Valletta's streets and recollected the sense of adventure in discovering things never seen before, and the enjoyment derived from this. Several interviewees referred to the enjoyment of exploring the side streets, the fun of "looking in the small streets, and what there is behind". The features were nothing out of the ordinary but they were unexpected and the sense of discovery provided a source of enjoyment.

The interactions of the tourist with other people

Alongside interactions with their physical surrounding, the data revealed that tourist experiences were influenced greatly by interactions with others. These interactions varied in the different urban spaces in Valletta and reflected the variety of activities as well as the shape and size of the urban spaces in which they occurred. At one extreme was the 'sea of people' in Republic Street mentioned by one interviewee creating the 'hustle and bustle' observed by another. Then there were the quieter places with less 'buzz' but still with people around. For example, an interviewee noted the presence of people in Pjazza Regina, a square surrounded by historic buildings with some public seating. Here people had more space to move and could slow down which created a relaxed environment and an enjoyable feeling. Positive comments were also made about the presence of people in Pjazza San Gorg, a square with a fountain close to the Palace main gate and benches, tables and chairs in one corner. The presence of people walking, standing, sitting and chatting in these historic urban spaces created an ambience that interviewees described as attractive, relaxed and safe. The common element, namely the presence of people, enhanced the tourist experience, making these spaces more interesting. Richards and Palmer (2010) argue that individuals seek an optimal level of stimulation and in Valletta's urban spaces optimal stimulation was associated with the presence of people. Outdoor tables and chairs, a typical characteristic of Mediterranean cities, provided the experience of being surrounded by people and were also identified as places to rest, reflect and watch people go by.

In many interviews, it emerged that tourists desired to get to know, or in some way be involved, in the lives of local residents. Some walked in the more residential parts of Valletta to seek out features that they perceived to be a reflection of how people lived. The desire to connect with the local often refers to physical objects that the tourist interprets as a reflection of local life. One interviewee saw the washing hanging outside the balconies as something that

signified that the place was alive with local people. For her, this made this place beautiful. Another interviewee noted how, in the older apartment blocks, women let baskets down from the windows for the bread. He was intrigued by this and perceived it to be a form of communication between the residents in their houses and the outside streets. Aspects related to religion were also cited by several interviewees as features that reflected the lives of local people. One noted how features in the streets told her about people's religiosity and therefore also about their way of life. These included street decorations for the parish feast, niches at street corners and the religious wall tablets over doorways. As she put it, she liked them because the local people liked them.

The friendliness of local people is also appreciated by tourists, creating a positive experience. Direct interaction between the local and the tourist was appreciated and a sense that help would be available if needed provided peace of mind. Tourists' perception of friendliness was linked to the historical connection between Malta and Britain and the positive attitude of the Maltese towards the British. People appreciated being in a culture that, although different from their own, had sufficient similarities to make it 'comfortable' with some regarding Malta as their second home.

The interactions of the tourist with self

The 'meaning' dimension of the tourist experience was more complex and our data suggests that it is perhaps useful to understand the third element of the tourist experience as one involving interaction with self. The search for meaning is described by some writers as a primary motivation in a person's life (Frankl, 1992, p. 105) and its relevance to the tourism experience should not be underestimated. In this paper sensations of self-actualisation are understood as interactions with self.

Our interviewees interactions with self were sometimes directly connected to a specific physical and social environment. Some described how they enjoyed spending time in a public place, like the Upper Barrakka garden, just sitting, relaxing and watching whatever is happening around them. Interaction with self appeared to arise when people felt that they were in an environment where they were at peace with themselves or which provided time and space for reflection. Here they could engage intellectually with an aspect of their surroundings to try to interpret or understand a place, building or feature. For example, one couple were intrigued by a memorial and reflected together and alone to understand what it was about.

Zatori et al (2018) describe experiences as subjective, personal and emotional and this study supports the notion that the meanings of buildings, spaces and artefacts are heavily influenced by the tourist's own cultural and social background, memories, interests and concerns (Wearing and Wearing, 1996; Voase, 2002). One interviewee noted how the narrow streets of Valletta reminded him of the similar streets of historic towns in Southern France and Spain. Another interviewee took photos of doors of Valletta's houses. Their massiveness and fine workmanship reminded her of the doorway of her childhood home.

Similar to research by Stevenson and Inskip (2009), for many of our interviewees meaning making involved comparisons between Valletta and home or a place visited previously. These comparisons created reference points, establishing similarity and difference, and contemplations of the unique and familiar aspects of a place. Our interviewees previous experience, knowledge and acquaintance with other places, impinged on their experience of Valletta.

The nature of interviewees reflection or interaction with self in Valletta was influenced by being away from their usual environment as most people were engaging with the city at a leisurely place. As tourists they had more time to reflect than they would normally in their daily routine. Several interviewees referred to the enjoyment of just 'being there' in an

environment without mundane pressures; where they could spend time seeing, hearing, smelling and generally enjoying the surroundings.

Some places are part of the tourism itinerary because they are associated with powerful stories (Chronis, 2012). Ashworth and Tunbridge (2004, p. 15) explain how two major historic episodes in Malta's history, namely the Great Siege of 1565 and Malta's role in World War II (1940-44), provide a narrative for "almost an ideal tourism product". This is reflected in our research and for many of our interviewees, history and narrative were dominant in the experience of a historic area. Not all of these narratives of place were grounded in historical fact, but for most interviewees the idea of 'history' and their position within it provide the narrative which they found interesting. Many tourism experiences are dependent on the availability and communication of narratives and in our research we became aware of the way that these were reworked and given meaning through a process of conversation and reflection while people were in the historic spaces of Valletta.

In Valletta's streets and spaces there are very few buildings that are evidently of recent origin. Some interviewees express a feeling of being taken back in time. This feeling of being in a different time is further reinforced in spaces where there are no cars, like for example in Valletta's stepped streets and in the pedestrian streets and squares. There were several instances where the interviewee's interaction with self involved the imagination or the visualision of how it was in the past. Cherifi et al's (2018) study illustrates how imagined experiences create a sense of personalised engagement and richer conceptualisation of a destination. This is reflected in the imaginations of our interviewees which was related to the period of the Knights, and Word War II. One interviewee explained that old war films came to mind when he was at the Upper Barrakka looking over the Grand Harbour enabling him to reflect upon moments of World War II.

Other visitors visualised and imagined how buildings were constructed, how the large stones were handled without modern day machinery and how the required precision in the stone working was achieved. They compared these with their experience of a modern-day construction site. Others imagined Maltese peoples lives and used their own experiences to search for personally relevant and interesting evidence of city life.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore tourist experience, with specific reference to experiences of heritage urban spaces and this was done through a case study based in Valletta. Our findings indicated that while the intrinsic qualities or form of spaces in Valletta are relevant to the tourist experience, of more relevance are the interactions of the tourist with different elements within that space (self, others and surroundings). This resonates with Carmona et al. (2010) and Griffin and Hayllar (2007) both of whom highlight the importance of peoples' interactions with these different elements. Our framing around tourists interactions with surroundings, others and self, was comparable with the framing adopted in earlier studies by Gustafson (2001) and Loeffler (2004). Within this broad conceptual model, the research identified important sub-themes. Some of these reinforced the findings of existing work on tourist experiences, but we also identified elements that are under-estimated or neglected. These include the influence of the mundane, the significant role of local people, the importance of movement and the potential to be at ease with oneself. Further work would be useful to examine these ideas in other contexts, but this paper provides a useful framework with which to understand tourist experiences in built environments.

There is much discussion in the literature about whether it is useful or even possible to distinguish tourists from other users of destinations. This paper makes an important contribution to these debates. Our findings suggest that tourist experiences may be distinctive

because they experience things differently and this is associated with their sense of discovery and pace of exploration. The tourists in this study experience the city at a leisurely pace, something which facilitates a different perspective. They also notice things that might normally be considered mundane by local people. They may be increasingly hard to differentiate from other city users, but this paper suggests that it is still useful to analyse the specific experiences of tourists.

Our study suggests that consideration of form, activity and meaning are useful, but are insufficient, if we are to appreciate the factors that influence tourist experiences of urban spaces. Historic urban spaces might attract a person to a destination but essentially for our interviewees they provided a background or a setting for a variety of different embodied, social and reflective explorations, and experiences. The process of experiencing the heritage space was similar to that identified by Stevenson and Farrell (2018) and arose from a combination of movement through spaces, pauses, conversations and a mixture of individual and shared reflection. This layered process involved people drawing upon narratives about the city and processing them using their previous experiences, memories and imagination to create their own unique stories and experiences.

As stated earlier a limitation of this study is that most of our research subjects were over 60, this older population being particularly evident in the historic core of Valletta during the study period. One other limitation was that many of our research participants were British, again reflects the large numbers of British people who visit Malta generally and who were available during the study period. While it is possible that younger people and other nationalities would experience these historic urban spaces in different ways this is beyond the scope of this study and deserves attention in future studies.

Our study illustrates that the City was experienced in multiple ways and peoples experiences of the historic fabric were based upon an accumulation of different types of interactions. Enjoyment of Valletta's historic spaces appeared to be afforded by the varied possibilities for interactions with self/meaning, with others and/or with surroundings. These experiences intersected, built upon one another, and involved physically mapping the city by the embodied exploration of it, imagination of its past and its people, and sharing ideas and interactions with other tourists. This research is useful in the first instance to tourism practitioners involved in the design of tourism packages that include visits to historic urban areas. An understanding of how the tourist interacts with form, activity and meaning will enable the practitioners to develop enriched and more memorable experience for the tourist clients. The research can also be useful to urban designers and urban planners as they will be able to include the tourism experience dimension in their thinking on urban spaces. While many aspects of our study resonate with other studies and this paper extends the literature by exploring tourists appreciation of space from an urban design perspective and in a heritage setting. The findings of our study suggest a place that offers diverse types of interactions or 'layers of experience' is more likely to provide a meaningful and memorable experience to the tourist.

References

Andereck K., Bricker, K., Kerstetter, D. and N.P. Nickerson (2006). *Connecting experiences to quality: Understanding the meanings behind visitors' experiences.* In Jennings, G and Nickerson, N. (eds) *Quality Tourism Experiences.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Ashworth, G. (1995) *Managing the Cultural Tourist*. In G. Ashworth and A. Doetvorst (eds) *Tourism and Spatial Transformations*. Wallingford: CAB International.

Ashworth, G.J. and J.E. Tunbridge (2004). *Malta Makeover: prospects for the realignment of heritage, tourism and development.* URSI Report 304, Urban and Regional Studies Institute, University of Groningen.

Baldacchino, G. (2009). Pangs of nascent nationalism from the nationless state? Euro coins and undocumented migrants in Malta since 2004. *Nations and Nationalism*, 15(1), 148–165.

Berleant, A. (2003) The aesthetic in place. In S. Menin (ed), *Constructing Place: Mind and Matter* (41-54). London: Routledge.

Bramwell, B. (2007) 'Complexity, interdisciplinary and growth management: the case of Maltese resort tourism', in S. Agarwal and G. Shaw (eds) *Managing Coastal Tourism Resorts*, Clevedon: Channelview, 73-89.

Bødker, M. and D. Browning (2012). Beyond destinations: exploring tourist technology design spaces through local–tourist interactions, *Digital Creativity*, 23:3-4, 204-224.

Botterill, T. D., & Crompton, J. L. (1996). Two case studies exploring the nature of the tourist's experience. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28, 57–82.

Burns, A. (2000). Emotion and urban experience: implications for design. *Design Issues.* 16(3), 67- 79

Cameron, C.M. and J.B.Gatewood (2012) *The numen experience in heritage tourism.* In Smith L., Waterton, E. and S. Watson (eds). *The Cultural Moment in Tourism.* Routledge.

Canter, D. (1977) *The Psychology of Place.* London: Architectural Press.

Carmona, M., Heath, T.; Oc, T. and Tiesdall, S. (2010) *Public places - urban spaces: the dimensions of urban design. Second Edtion.* Oxford: Architectural Press.

Cherifi, B., Smith, A., Maitland, R. and Stevenson, N. (2018) Beyond Image: Imagined experiences of a destination. *International Journal of Tourism Research.* 20 (6) 748-755.

Chronis, A. (2012). Tourists as Story-Builders: Narrative Construction at a Heritage Museum, *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 29(5), 444-459.

Chronis, A (2015) Moving bodies and the staging of the tourist experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 55, 124-140.

Cohen, E. (1979). A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences. *Sociology*, 13, 179-201

Connell, J. and D. Meyer (2004) 'Modelling the Visitor Experience in the Gardens of Great Britain'. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 7(3), 183-216

Ebejer, J. (2013) *The quality of urban spaces in Valletta and their relevance to tourism*. University of Malta international seminar: *Regenerating Sicilian and Maltese waterfronts: Perspectives from two Mediterranean islands.* 25 July, Malta. Retrieved from https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/14832

Ebejer, J. (2018). Urban heritage and cultural tourism development: a case study of Valletta's role in Malta's tourism. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 1-15.

Ek, R., J. Larsen, J., S. Hornskov, S. and O. Mansfeldt (2008) A Dynamic Framework of Tourist Experiences: Space-Time and Performances in the Experience Economy. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism,* 8:2, 122-140.

Fagence, M. (2017) A heritage 'trailscape': tracking the exploits of historical figures – an Australian case study, *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 12:5, 452-462

Frankl, V. (1992) *Man's Search for Meaning : an Introduction to Logotherapy* . London: Rider.

Hayllar, B. and T. Griffin (2005) The precinct experience; A phenomenological approach. *Tourism Management* 26 (4), pp 517-528.

Gehl, J. (1987) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Gibbs, G. (2007) *Analysing qualitative data.* (Book 6 of The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit). London: Sage.

Griffin, T., and B. Hayllar (2007). Historic waterfronts as tourism precincts: An experiential perspective. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *7*(1), 3–16.

Gustafson, P. (2001) Meanings of place: Everyday experience and theoretical conceptualizations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21(1), 5-16.

Hayes, D. and N. Macleod (2007). Packaging places: Designing heritage trails using an experience economy perspective to maximize visitor engagement. *Journal of Vacation Marketing.* 13 (1), 45-58.

Henning, G.K. (2012) The habit of tourism: Experiences and their ontological meanings. In R. Sharpley and P.R. Stone (eds) *Contemporary Tourist Experience : Concepts and Consequences*. Routledge Advances in Tourism.

Jamal, T. and K. Hollinshead (2001). Tourism and the forbidden zone: the underserved power of qualitative inquiry. *Tourism Management,* 22, 63-82.

Jennings G. R. (2005) Interviewing: A Focus on Qualitative Techniques. In B. Ritchie, P. Burns and C. Palmer (eds) *Tourism Research Methods*. CAB International, Wallingford, UK.

Loeffler, T. (2004) A Photo Elicitation Study of the Meanings of Outdoor Adventure Experiences. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36(4), 536-556.

Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Malta Tourism Authority (2015) *Market Profile Survey.* Valletta: Malta.

Maitland, R. (2009) *Introduction: National capitals and city tourism*. In Maitland, R. and J.R. Brent Ritchie (eds) *City tourism: National capital perspective*. Oxfordshire: CABI.

Maitland, R. and A. Smith (2009) Tourism and the Aesthetics of the Built Environment. In Tribe, J. (ed.), *Philosophical Issues in Tourism*. Bristol : Channel View.

MacLeod, N. (2017) The role of trails in the creation of tourist space, *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 12:5, 423-430.

McIntosh, A. J. (1999). Into the Tourist's Mind: Understanding the Value of the Heritage Experience. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 8 (1), 41-64.

Montgomery, J.R. (1998) Making a city: urbanity, vitality and urban design. *Journal of Urban Design*, 3(1), 93-116.

Moscardo, G. (2010) The shaping of tourist experience: The importance of stories and themes. In Morgan, M., Lugosi, P. and Brent Ritchie J.R. (eds.) *The tourism and leisure experience; Consumer and managerial perspectives.* Channel View Publications.

Orbasli, A. (2000) *Tourists in Historic Towns: Urban Conservation and Heritage Management*. London : E&FN Spon.

Pearce, P. (2005) *Tourist behaviour: Themes and conceptual schemes*. Clevedon : Channel View Publications.

Pearce, P. and M. Fagence (1996) The Legacy of Kevin Lynch. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 23(2), 576-598.

Punter, J. (1991). Participation in the design of urban space. *Landscape Design*, 200, 24-27.

Relph, E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. London, Pion Limited.

Richards, G. and R. Palmer (2010). *Eventful cities; Cultural management and urban revitalization*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Rickly Boyd, J. (2009) The Tourist Narrative. *Tourist Studies* 9(3), 259-280.

Sancar, F.H. and Y.C. Severcan (2010) 'Children's Places: Rural-Urban Comparisons Using Participatory Photography in the Bodrum Peninsula, Turkey', *Journal of Urban Design*, 15(3), 293-324.

Sather-Wagstaff, J. (2008) Picturing experience: A tourist-centered perspective on commemorative historical sites. *Tourist Studies,* 8(1) 77-103.

Sinha, A. and Y. Sharma (2009) Urban Design as a Frame for Site Readings of Heritage Landscapes: A Case Study of Champaner-Pavagadh, Gujarat, India *Journal of Urban Design,* 14(2), 203-221.

Smith, A. (2009) *The relationship between capital city monumentality and tourism in Valletta*. In Maitland, R. and J.R. Brent Ritchie (eds) *City tourism: National capital perspective*. Oxfordshire:CABI.

Smith, A. (2010) The role of national identity and tourism in city planning: the case of Valletta, *Urban Research & Practice*, 3(1), 63-84.

Smith, A., and J. Ebejer (2012). Outward versus inward orientation of island capitals: the case of Valletta. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 15(1-2), 137-152.

Stevenson, N. and H. Farrell (2017) Taking a Hike: Exploring leisure walkers embodied experiences. *Social and Cultural Geography.* 19(4), 429-447.

Stevenson N. and C. Inskip (2009) Seeing the Sites – Perceptions of London. Chapter 8 in eds. Maitland, R. and Ritchie, B. *City Tourism- National Capital Perspectives.* Wallingford. Cabi International.

Sultana, T. and M. Attard (2016). Measuring the impact of ECoC Valletta 2018 on travel motivations and behaviour of tourists in Malta. Retrieved from http://tsf2016venice.enit.it/images/articles/Papers_Forum/5.2_Measuring%20the%20impact%20of%20ECoC%20Valletta%202018%20on%20Travel%20Motivations%20and%20Behaviour%20of%20Tourists%20in%20Malta.pdf.

Suvantola, J. (2002) *Tourist's experience of place.* Aldershot : Ashgate.

Voase, R. (2002). Rediscovering the imagination: Investigating active and passive experience in the 21st century. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4, 391-399.

Wearing, B. and S. Wearing (1996). Refocusing the tourist experience; the flaneur and the choraster *Leisure studies*, 1, 229-43.

Wunderlich, F. M. (2008) Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space, *Journal of Urban Design*, 13(1), 125-139.

Zatori, A, M.K. Smith and L. Puczko (2018) Experience-involvement, memorability and authenticity: The service provider's effect on tourist experience. *Tourism Management.* 67, 111-126.