A review of ‘Small town Tourism in South Africa

Melphon Mayaka

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BOOK REVIEW


In *Small Town Tourism in South Africa*, author Ronnie Donaldson examines tourism-led development in small towns with specific reference to the case of South Africa. As the first volume with this title in the *Urban Book Series*, the book comprising of eight chapters explores the issues and challenges faced in the processes of transformation or change of spaces in small towns. In Chapter 1, ‘Small Towns in Context’, Donaldson draws on Rogerson’s (2013) theme of urban tourism in sub-Saharan Africa and Visser’s (2013) focus on non-poor in urban studies to outline the rationale of the book. This is hinged on the need to examine the role of private enterprise and ‘fortunate cohorts in society’ in the processes that affect ‘spatial change’ (p. 8); such as rural gentrification. The author illustrates these processes with specific attention to the peculiarities of small towns within the South African context. I examine each chapter (denoted by title in italics) in the remaining part of this review with the stated focus in mind.

The conceptualization of small towns, the cases analyzed and their settings within post-apartheid South Africa, potentially provides lessons on the transition from centralized state control to devolved tourism governance systems. The issues addressed may also mirror those that confront small town rejuvenation, as well as the possibilities of transformation of the so-called pleasure peripheries to learning spaces where there can be meaningful interaction between peoples and cultures. ‘A Decade of Small Town Tourism Research in South Africa’, explores extensive literature that would form a good starting point for anyone researching the field under several overarching themes: second homes; festivals and events; local economic development; tourism routes; visiting friend and relatives; and other research. Perhaps the next volume will be able to look at these themes with greater depth and specificity. There is also a need to widen the scope of literature to include a more global and/or regional reach.

Donaldson applies the concept of branding in the next chapter, ‘In the Name of Tourism: Developing an Image and Brand in the Book Town of Richmond’. The distinction between place branding and destination marketing (p. 47) is notable. While place branding concentrates on the image of the place, destination marketing is aimed at attracting visitors. Two lessons can be drawn from this case. First, is the need for unique place identity and second, the flexibility such an identity must hold to accommodate a variety of place presentations. The challenges include partnerships, especially public-private and the integration of local resources and services with the chosen image or theme. This is an important chapter, though it takes the author a while to get to the core of the subject. There are also some broad-based claims that need further support and validation, an example of which is the statement, ‘community members need to support their leaders in community development processes…’ (p.60). There is also a need to more explicitly draw out key lessons that can be learnt from the case of Richmond as a Book Town. In ‘Some More Branding: “Town of the Year” as Stimulus for Tourism Growth’, the author extends the theme of branding to review two cases, the towns of De Rust and Fouriesburg; winners of Kwela Town of the Year (KToY) in 2011 and 2013, respectively. The analysis of the process of branding and the outcomes of tourism-led development, particularly community participation and public involvement described in the qualitative analysis of the cases, identifies and uncovers the key issues. The emergent lessons include the need for strong leadership,
collective efforts, regional approach or co-operation of neighboring cities and the probable revitalization of small towns through branding.

‘Cittaslow: Going Nowhere Slowly’, is an examination of the slow cities concept and its application in the coastal town of Sedgefield. A wide range of literature addressing the key sub-concepts within the slow cities movement including slow food, slow tourism, slow travel and slow housing is covered. However, one would want to understand the extent to which the theoretical perspectives apply within a broader context, regional or global. In addition, these theoretical foundations need further distilling for a better foregrounding of the findings. For example, the link between slow food, slow tourism and slow travel, as well as slow housing needs to be more explicit. Works such as Lowry and Lee (2011) may provide a more systematic approach to understanding the relationships between these concepts. It may also be necessary to demonstrate more clearly how slow tourism differs from other alternative forms of tourism mentioned in the chapter. Additionally, since there are no criteria provided in the literature review for assessment of the slowness of a city, readers are left to apply those set out by the inventors of the Cittaslow concept as outlined in the chapter.

In ‘Rural (Small Town) Tourism-led Gentrification’, Donaldson analyses rural tourism-led gentrification as a process of movement of people from ‘expanding’ metropolis into whole towns and developments that ‘lock out’ rural residents (p.122). The author draws on Friedberger’s (1996) analysis of transformation of ranches in America’s West and Hines’ (2010) conception of migration of American middle class as ‘permanent tourism’ to establish the link between rural and tourism-led gentrification. However, readers may find this relationship to be ambiguous in light of more familiar definitions and understanding of the tourism phenomenon. Donaldson follows this theoretical discussion with the description of Greyton in Cape Province as an archetype of rural gentrification. Accordingly, rural gentrification in the case of South Africa is laced with race politics and post-apartheid population movements (p.120). The author has pointed out, for example, that forced removal of populations in the apartheid South Africa in ‘state-led gentrification’ is unique to the country (p. 130). The historical analysis of the changes that have occurred in Greyton with regard to demographics, property ownership and investment based on Zukin (1990) and Phillips (2004) is informative, although one would have expected both pieces in the literature review section.

‘And Then There was Another Festival’, commences with an exploration of a wide range of festivals and events literature in a way that is commendable. The Entertainment, Educational, Escapist, Esthetic (4Es) (p.153), or another framework, could be useful in measuring the economic impacts and the ‘imaging of places’ through events as the stated focus of the chapter (p.151). The chapter outcomes would be further enhanced through a more systematic approach, including clearly laid out chapter objectives pursued in the analysis and body of the text. Readers may be left wondering whether this is a methods chapter or a case study of the events in the context of small town tourism in South Africa.

In ‘Conclusion: The Power Behind Tourism Development’, Donaldson ends with power as the overarching thesis of the book, especially how power motivated local elites are the main beneficiaries of tourism and urban developmental processes. One may question the introduction of ‘power’ discussion in this last chapter as it has not been established as this volume’s theoretical background. Similarly, there is reason to interrogate the relevance of Bourdieu (1993) in this concluding chapter. Overall, Small-Town Tourism in South Africa has the potential to enrich literature on tourism-led development, in peripheral areas in general, and small towns in particular.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
References


Melphon Mayaka

*School of Business, Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia*

melphonm@gmail.com; mmayaka@academic.mit.edu.au

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