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The Her.cul.es International Summer Seminar

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ABSTRACT

A report of the assigned tasks and methodologies used by the participants of the Assisi Summer Seminar “Tourism Management at World Heritage Site”, which was held in Assisi, Italy in July 2013 taken from the participants’ perspectives.

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From the participants' perspectives, the Assisi Summer Seminar was a great success. The seminar presented a wonderful opportunity to engage with talented students from universities within the Maghreb and European countries who are interested in understanding the role of tourism within a World Heritage Site. The workshop, which took place in the magnificent historic center of Assisi, allowed the students to gain much insight and realize the issues related to tourism and world heritage from various perspectives. The participants were divided into groups, each with a specific theme. The themes included: 'Encounters', 'Communication', 'Actors' and 'Spaces'.

The group with the theme of 'Encounters' was given the task of interacting with the locals and tourists to develop an understanding of how Assisi's status as World Heritage works within the community and how the local community and tourists perceive the city as well recognizing the impacts of tourism. The methodology used was qualitative and included semi-structured interviews with both local stakeholders and tourists.

The 'Communication' group undertook the role of understanding and analyzing the communication, Public Relations, and marketing strategies in Assisi to realize how Assisi relates to its World Heritage status. The group began with recognizing Assisi's values as a World Heritage Site and then by ascertaining *what* was being communicated, to *whom* and *how*. In doing so, the group identified the communicators and the receivers involved (both official and informal) and analyzed the different communication mediums, including websites and interpretive material. The group's methodology also included interviews.

The role of the 'Actors' group was to identify and engage with the stakeholders and understand the relationship between tourism and World Heritage. They responded to the question of 'who is doing what and in which way?'. The methodology included the classification of stakeholders on a four-level scale: international, national, regional and local. Because of the limited time of the workshop, the group focused on the *local* scale. The group also conducted interviews with local stakeholders in order to know their different perspectives, problems and needs concerning their city, its future, and how tourism plays a role within the city.

The 'Spaces' group, which I had the pleasure of taking part in, worked to identify and examine both the tangible and intangible spaces in Assisi. We began by looking at Assisi through a technical point of view as a global organization of space. An urban analysis was then conducted to gain an understanding of how the city works physically as well as establishing the geographical and historical attributes of Assisi. We then looked to identify the various spaces of Assisi, including spiritual, commercial, landscape, social, and so on, and also conducted interviews with locals and tourists to realize their 'sense of place'. Through these steps we were able to define the site's strengths, weaknesses and threats.

Conclusions

Some premises should be taken into account before going to the conclusions. What emerged clearly from our analysis on the four main themes is that tourism is a fundamental part of the town: the majority of inhabitants are dealing with it, they are proud to be part of the city and really concerned with the preservation of the site. Among them we witnessed a plenty of views from different stakeholders (namely local residents, religious communities, tourists, pilgrims, local authorities, residents involved in the tourist industry). Accordingly it would be rather complicated and long process to satisfy all of them with new course of development in the city.

Starting from these premises we acknowledged some common, intertwined, issues dealing with the four themes and the above mentioned stakeholders, that could be illustrated as follow:

1. Commercialization of the city, that could be labelled as a “Spiritual Disneyland”, due to the common feeling of a “postcard city” that does not work for locals, even if it could be desirable for tourists. Moreover we appreciated a sort of “museification” of the city, that return us the image of Assisi as a sanctuary, a living museum, which limits its potential.
2. Strong preference for the religious and historical aspect of the city, while the natural and artistic values tend to be treated rather peripherally. It led to develop almost one kind of tourism: the religious one.
3. Lack of promotion of Assisi’s Roman spaces. As some historians observed, Roman historical part of Assisi has always been neglected. Furthermore there are some other underestimated but characteristic elements of the city: mild climate, presence of water, tradition of welcoming land.
4. Limitations to facilitating needs and demands in a modern world inside the historical core (which lacks store necessity) and lack of cultural and social values both for residents and tourists, that is due in part, to the earthquake of 1997, after which many business and the university moved out. Consequently some inhabitants decided to move outside the medieval wall (for instance to Santa Maria degli Angeli) where life is less expensive, less touristic, more comfortable, with a more lively social life.
5. Lack of sponsorship and support from the municipality. Stakeholders complain that they are not involved in the decision-making and claim for more interaction with local authorities.
6. Lack of uniformity among the communication tools, causing confusion between tourists (the brochure’s layout varies depending on the language, there is not a coherent system of mediums)
7. Problems with the management of the UNESCO site, due to the huge amount of tourists and the way they interact with locals, and with the management of the

relation between the historical core and Santa Maria degli Angeli. People involved in the management of the site also report a lack of communication between UNESCO club of Assisi and the World Heritage Centre based in Paris and an inadequate emphasis on UNESCO brand, insomuch as tourists barely know about it

While the site managers have accomplished many great achievements in the promotion and management of the site, there are still some critical issues which must be addressed. We have considered two main issues:

- *How to balance modern needs and concerns of residents with the protection of the site and improve the quality of life.*
- *How to diversify the image of the city and promote Assisi's other spaces – Roman sites and surrounding green spaces.*

Regarding the first point we suggest:

- a) Active community participation through different tools: a forum for local stakeholder involvement, surveys to understand residents' concerns and to understand what is missing for Assisi as a home and a city ; closer collaboration between the different associations (right now there are too many making it difficult to carry out projects and there is a risk of too much repetition between them. They should come together and understand each other's aims and goals which can be proposed to the mayor, thus benefitting the city).
- b) Creation of incentives to attract residents and to attract tourists to stay in Assisi for more than a day. This could be accomplished in many ways: establishing lower rent prices to attract more permanent residents and businesses Diversify spaces (adding more cultural and social places to attract youth); establishing more parking facilities for residents; encouraging farm stays at an agriturismo (promoting the site as a relaxing retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life); introducing more shops (grocery stores) for residents.
- c) Improvement of limitations as a vertical city, by limiting streets to pedestrian only, making use of existing buildings to improve growth (many businesses closed due to the economic crisis), dividing the functions between the historical city and the borderling urban areas, building of diffused spaces that create a sense of harmony with the environment around them.

With regard to the second point - diversify the image of the city and promoting Assisi's other spaces – we all agree with the following proposals:

- a) To reach an equilibrium between the three main components of tourism interests in the city: environment, culture, religion. This could be achieved by a change of the Assisi brand in order to give it a new image that integrates the various aspects the city consists of and by boosting the UNESCO brand
- b) To promote Roman history. Designate special days for the opening of the interiors of Roman homes to the public; promote the museum for the Roman forum and emphasize and illustrate the Roman history of Piazza del Comune; organize guided tours that incorporate or focus on Roman history.

- c) To make use of the green spaces surrounding the site as well as other public areas. Other initiatives in this field: promote agricultural significance of the town (emphasize Umbria's gastronomy; create wine and food tasting tours; culinary classes; groups who want to learn more about production including wine and olive picking); foster ecotourism (utilize surrounding areas for walking, biking and hiking trails; create an adventure sports program; encourage stays at an agriturismo); establish more cultural events to attract locals and tourists (create events on top of the hill to highlight social life in Assisi)
- d) To include young people with specific skills in the field of culture and tourism into the decision-making process.