The uses and auratic power of policy tourism

Tom Baker

University of Auckland, New Zealand

Script of a verbal presentation given at the International Conference on Public Policy, June 2017, Singapore

Work in progress—please do not circulate

***

In 2009, a newspaper headline that read "Big Apple plan for Sydney homeless" announced the arrival of a different way of addressing the issue homelessness in Australia. Upending the traditional treatment-first approach to homelessness, this "housing first" approach provided direct access to permanent housing coupled with intensive, ongoing, client-directed support services. The "Big Apple" part of the plan referred to a particular housing first model associated with Common Ground, a New York City organisation famed for its grand refurbishments of formerly derelict Midtown Manhattan hotels.

But Sydney wasn't alone in looking to New York. In the wake of visits to Australia by Common Ground's founder Rosanne Haggerty, who was employed as a consultant by two state governments, cities around Australia were designing and implementing their own Common Ground projects. Two projects in Adelaide, two in Hobart, one in Melbourne and this one in Brisbane were all in the works. Among politicians, public officials, service providers and advocates, something of a policy awakening was sweeping across the country. Now built, these facilities are the material outcome of what this conference session is all about: policy transfer (or what geographers like myself have become accustomed to calling policy mobility).

Despite its framing as a road-tested, made-to-travel model, the importation of the Common Ground model to Australia did not spontaneously result from Rosanne Haggerty's consultant reports, even with the considerable authority that came with having created the model herself. Nor was it desktop exercise in figuring out 'what works' by compiling and digesting the vast, international bodies of information on Housing First that were readily available to Australian policy actors. Even though Australian policy actors had consultant reports, program evaluations, administrative cost studies, online videos, virtual seminars, and international media coverage at their fingertips, they still placed a premium on seeing the Common Ground model for themselves as "policy tourists".

In this presentation, I want to answer this question: why does policy tourism persist in an age of technologically mediated information abundance? To do so, I'll refer to a small but growing sub-set of the policy transfer/mobility literature that focuses specifically on policy tourism, and introduce the cultural critic Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" as a useful complement to that literature. I'll focus less on the case study of the Common Ground model in Australia and more on the conceptual side of things.

If we look to the literature on policy tourism, we see four main uses for its existence and persistence as a method of policy learning and policy transfer. The first is that policy tourism allows people to escape the demands and constraints of regular work. Part of this is hedonistic, of course. People tend to like the excitement of travel. However, this side of policy tourism is often the topic of public scorn. For example, in the UK, trips that appear (or are) insufficiently justified or needlessly luxurious are framed as "jollies"; in Australia, the term "junket" is fairly commonplace. Beyond the purely hedonistic side of policy tourism there is often a genuine desire to remove oneself from the demands and constraints of regular work in order to reflect and think creatively about particular policy issues. Sara Gonzalez (2011: 1400) notes that policy tourism involves being "taken out of the ordinary". Hudson and Kim (2014: 503), likewise, talk about policy tourism offering "a welcome change of scene and … space to refresh [one's] thinking".

The second use of policy tourism is that it enables the development of associational bonds between members of the touring party and between tourists and their hosts. Policy tourism offers the opportunity for connections to be forged and strengthened between tourists because, like any group-based activity, there is a sense of shared purpose and shared experience. This can entail the development of bonds between peers, such as between two social service managers or two politicians, but it can also entail the development of bonds between those lobbying for policy change and those in positions of decision-making authority. Cook and Ward (2011: 2525) talk about this when they say that policy tourism is about learning and lobbying. Indeed, social service managers that I've interviewed in relation to the Common Ground model in Australia referred to the helpful lobbying opportunities they were afforded while on study tours with politicians and senior public servants. They had, in effect, a captive audience of decision-makers. However, beyond the bonds that are forged between tourists, policy tourism also offers a way to building relationships with people beyond one's local or national context, particularly with the people and organisations that host the touring parties.

The third use of policy tourism is that it allows for knowledge acquisition. This applies to both codified and tacit knowledge. Despite the general abundance of codified information—such as reports, research, and diverse forms of testimony—brought on by technologically-enabled connectivity, not everything is available remotely. This means that policy tourism can be useful for the collection of codified information. This was the case in my research on Common Ground, where an Australian social service manager encountered the use of 'before-and-after' images of Common Ground's

clients. This particular person brought these images beck to Australia and began using them in their local lobbying efforts. Perhaps more important, though, is the role that policy tourist encounters play in the acquisition of tacit knowledge. Rapoport's (2015) research on the study tours of town planners shows that there is often a premium placed on physical co-presence or first-hand encounter in generating a nuanced understanding of how something works and whether or not it is transferrable. She calls this process "learning through inhabiting" (p. 312).

The fourth use of policy tourism that is canvassed within the literature is that it enables the legitimation of policy positions. We might see legitimation is two different ways. First, policy tourism is used in a self-legitimising fashion. Gonzalez (2011: 1411) notes this when she says that tourist encounters offer "reassurance [and] comfort … for the kind of [policies] that policy-makers and politicians already employ or would like to implement". Second, policy tourism is used for external legitimation, such that policy actors can authoritatively promote particular ideas or approaches and inure those ideas or approaches against criticism by claiming that they've seen them first-hand.

These four aspects are helpful insofar as they allow us to understand the continuing relevance of policy tourism, even in times where policy actors can quite conceivably engage in "desktop" policy learning and policy transfer. However, what they don't tend to address is the seemingly out-sized *power* that policy tourist encounters have over particular people and, more generally, over the processes of policy learning and transfer. There is a revelatory dimension to policy tourism that isn't well represented in my discussion so far. As an example, take this quote from a consultant I interviewed about the implementation of the Common Ground model in Australia. She says:

> "everyone was going to the States and Canada and checking things out, coming back almost evangelical about … Common Ground. … There was this guy [from the Department of Human Services who had] come back from the States almost like a changed man. He had this sparkle in his eye just talking about it. It was really like this conversion thing."

This quote points to something quite powerful—at the level of the individual—in the experience of policy tourism. So what accounts for its impact on people? Many of the studies that focus on experiences of policy tourism hint at something else going on—something experiential, something affective, something that's compelling about the act of seeing something for one's self, of being there, of bearing witness. At the moment, though, we don't have a particularly well-developed understanding of how policy tourism generates the "evangelical" fervour suggested by the interviewee above.

This has led me to the critical tourism literature, which has similarly tried to make sense of why tourism remains a significant social practice. Through people like Jillian Rickly-Boyd (2012), the work of cultural critic Walter Benjamin has been used to deal with the continued relevance of tourism in the contemporary era. In a 1935 essay, Benjamin discusses what he calls the "aura" attached to physical artworks and contrasts them with photographic reproductions. This aura is not well defined in the essay, but it refers to the affective response elicited by witnessing and being physically proximate to a

work of art. A response that I think most of us would intuitively recognise from first hand encounters with an immaculate renaissance painting or a hulking abstract artwork. Away from its original association to artwork, tourism scholars have found this notion of the aura helpful in explaining the attraction of tourism and the compelling nature of the tourist experience. I see no reason why these insights can't be applied to understanding the often transformative power of policy tourism.

Above all, Benjamin's notion of aura refers to embodied experience: an affective response elicited by physical proximity to particular places and sites. Auratic power is produced not by the inherent properties of a place or a site, but through the interaction between people (in our case policy actors) and sites (in our case New York City in general and Common Ground facilities in particular). This process of interaction is pre-figured by the previous experiences of policy actors (their understandings, agendas, and expertise). Policy actors aren't blank slates—they bring baggage to their experiences as policy tourists. The baggage that policy actors bring to their encounters as policy tourists is constructed, in large part, by prior technologically mediated encounters. Rather than there being an antagonistic relationship between the aura power of embodied tourist experiences and the proliferation of technologically mediated information, the abundance of information serves to amplify auratic power. Like other types of tourism, information stokes and shapes demand for policy tourism rather than rendering it obsolete.

Benjamin talks of the aura as being related to three things: authenticity, ritual and distance. *Authenticity* refers to the singular, apparently genuine, tactile nature of the tourist site. *Ritual* is what Jameson Miller (2011) has called a "structure for reverence". In this sense, the auratic power of embodied experience is inflated by the fact that particular tourist sites become rites of passage. This was certainly part of the compelling nature of visiting Common Ground in New York—the idea that everyone was making the trip to see what it was all about. *Distance* can refer to both spatial and temporal distance, such that the policy idea "in action" that tourists witness is simultaneously present but infused with historical weight. What the Australian policy tourists were witnessing when they visited Common Ground in New York was not a building. It was the work of policy itself, overlain with history, infused with previously remote narratives and origin stories. Now that history and those stories are brought in close, made real.

In conclusion, this presentation has sought to discuss the continuing usefulness and apparent power of policy tourism in an age of technologically mediated information abundance. In conversation with literature on policy tourism I've highlighted four key uses: escape, associations, acquisition, and legitimation. What I'd recommend for future research is to build on this knowledge by focusing on the ways in which policy tourism exerts a form of auratic power. This would give us a better grip on not simply why policy tourism is *useful*—an important task, to be sure—but why policy tourism is *influential* in the processes of policy learning and policy transfer.

References

Cook, I. R. and Ward, K. (2011). Trans-urban networks of learning, mega events and policy tourism: The case of Manchester's Commonwealth and Olympic Games projects. *Urban Studies*, *48*(12), 2519–2535.

González, S. (2011). Bilbao and Barcelona "in motion": How urban regeneration "models" travel and mutate in the global flows of policy tourism. *Urban Studies*, *48*, 1397–1418.

Hudson, J. and Kim, B.-Y. (2014). Policy transfer using the "gold standard": Exploring policy tourism in practice. *Policy & Politics*, *42*(4), 495–511.

Miller, J. R. (2011). *Vancouver's Auratic Geographies*. MA Thesis: Simon Fraser University, Canada.

Rapoport, E. (2015). Sustainable urbanism in the age of Photoshop: Images, experiences and the role of learning through inhabiting the international travels of a planning model. *Global Networks*, *15*(3), 307–324.

Rickly-Boyd, J. M. (2012). Authenticity & aura: A Benjaminian approach to tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *39*(1), 269–289.