Heritage Tourism in Cartagena Colombia as a Case Study

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Figure 1: Old City of Cartagena from within the fortified walls

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Prior to the 1980s, Colombia was not on the bucket list for any tourists. Plagued by decades of violence, it had gained the notorious reputation of being one of the most dangerous countries in the world. However, after numerous interventions by both local authorities and foreign entities, there was a significant shift in the country's reputation. Coupled with the rise of the tourism industry in recent years, Colombia was the fifth most visited country in all of South America in the year 2019 according to the World Tourism Barometer [1]. Among the most visited cities in the entire country of Colombia is the city of Cartagena, a coastal city in the Caribbean region that was an important place for the New World conquistadors in the 16th century as it was an essential link the route of the West Indies. The old city is surrounded by fortified walls, and the inside consists of cobblestone streets, colorful residences with picturesque balconies, and a spirit of the past that is truly captivating.

In 1984, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization included Cartagena's Historic Center and its fortification system in the World Heritage List (WHL). They deemed it "… an eminent example of the military architecture of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, the most expansive of the New World and one of the most complete…"[2]. This official recognition further increased the number of tourists who visit the city of Cartagena every year. While COVID-19 has significantly dampened tourism in the region as it has globally, between the years of 1980 and 2020 Cartagena has served and will continue to serve as a fascinating example and case study for the complexities of heritage tourism.

Cartagena's tourism sector prompts questions about what tourism means in terms of both infrastructural and cultural heritage for the tourist and local, gentrification and exclusion with the creation of great wealth in the city, and raises concerns about sustainability considering rising sea levels and an overall great demand for a region that lacks municipal infrastructure.

Infrastructure

Cartagena's principal appeal is it gives tourists the opportunity to experience Colombian culture, artifacts and history authentically. UNESCO also states that the components that generally make up the city are authentic "in terms of location and setting, forms and designs, and materials and substance"[3]. The city's militaristic characteristics were seminal to its protection during its genesis, and to today remind visitors of Latin America's distinctively mixed culture. However, infrastructurally speaking for the buildings inside the fortress, their topological preservation is evident, but they are no longer preserved for their use. In fact, as imagined, the inside of the city has adapted its floor levels to commercial use. Many streets have abandoned their traditional flair in favor of high end boutiques, luxury stores, and restaurants that clearly did not exist in colonial times. Still, the tourist industry relies on being able to maintain the spirit of antiquity which made the city famous. Paseos en chivas, guided tours in folkloric buses, and horse carriages as noted by Elisabeth Cunin and Christian Rinaudo, claim certain myths and histories of certain buildings, statues, and monuments [4].

Additionally, to adapt to the influx of tourists, Bovedas, which were once "vaulted cellars cut into fortification that served to store ammunition" have been turned into souvenir shops to attract tourists[5]. Though the vaulted cellars remain, they no longer serve the purpose they used to. Tourism's impact is evident on every street corner, and it becomes more ingrained in the city's buildings every year. Even without tourism, it is possible these structures would have moved past their original purposes of storing ammunition for years to come, but the fact that it is commercial influence elucidates the neoliberal values projected onto the city. As Caragena becomes more profitable, its city officials and civilians will have to negotiate between their historical identity and lucrative opportunities.

Iconography

Fidelity to the tradition is key to attracting tourists and what makes Cartagena distinct from many other tourist locations around the world. Attractions around the city highlight the city's ability to blend the old with the new; for example, outside of the bovedas are often women dressed in garments posing for pictures. These women claim to be palenqueras, and wear brightly colored dresses, typically yellow, red and blue to emulate the Colombian flag and walk around with alegrias

Figure 2: Photograph from 1956 of militaristic infrastructure in Cartagena, Colombia

Figure 3: Palenquera outside of the Bovedas . Photo taken by me June 2017.

Figure 4: Bovedas which have been appropriated to become gift shops for tourists. Image from travel pamphlet.

which translates to happiness, on top of their head. These women have become symbols of Cartagena and are used as a selling point for the city. However, anthropologists and local Colombians have pointed out their attire is not actually reflective of what women in the villages typically wear, raising questions about their authenticity. Instead, many say that within the fortified city, the women are representative of an abstract vision of Colombia. They have become icons of Colombian culture and are used primarily for the tourist gaze, exemplified by the fact that tourists pay to take photos with them outside their boveda.

These icons have an interesting history, quite like the "Mammy" archetype depicting women of African descent in the United States [6]. These figures were taken from El Palenque de San Basilio which is a village 70 kilometers from Cartagena where women from this village would often and still do travel into the fortified city and sell their fruit. El Palenque is one the known "maroon villages established in the Atlantic region by formerly enslaved people of African descent who rebelled against slavery between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries [7]. Today, the people of Cartagena and its government have adapted this persona as a cultural icon. School children dress as them in parades, and carnivals throughout the country and pictures of these women are also often found in travel brochures promoting the cultural heritage of the colonial city.

Although these women have a real role in society today, it certainly feels strange from an outside perspective that other people take their lifestyle and tradition as a costume to profit off tourism. Further, the praise for them is asymmetrical: while their image is revered for its color and beauty, women of their economic and racial background still face acute discrimination from the Colombian government. Their lives have been exoticized for the sake of preserving an image and creating a false "authentic moment" for those who are visiting.

Gentrification, and Exclusion

Being named a UNESCO World Heritage Site after years of internal conflict comes with both its positive and negative sides. This official title has provided the monetary means to preserve the infrastructure within the historic city as well as the famous wall that surrounds the city and other militaristic infrastructure in the nearby area. It has also brought millions of tourists to the country, helping maintain the local economy and providing jobs to the community. Cartagena's formal recognition for its rich history eventually began to catch the attention of the country's elite and foreign investors which has led to the gentrification on the inside of the walls and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Growing up in Colombia, it was known that anyone who had a house inside the Old City was either rich and famous or simply unfathomably wealthy. In fact, even American celebrities like Justin Bieber have properties in the Old City. However, nobody who is really from the area lived inside the Old City.

Figure 5: Tourist Chiva. Photo from travel brochure.

These foreign investors have continued to raise property values and put a strain on the housing market. Getsemaní for example, is a town located outside of the historic district that has been facing many hardships ever since Cartagena de Indias received its official title. The local population of the working-class neighborhood has drastically decreased. For reference, 61% of the families in this neighborhood live on the minimum wage and a population census showed that between the years of 2012 and 2013, 10 % of native residents had to leave the neighborhood [8]. Poverty outside of the walled city is very apparent and the inequality is baffling. There are slum villages right outside with no running water and where "raw sewage flows in the street outside" while inside the walled city there are "renovated apartments at Manhattanlike prices"[9].

However, some scholars like Melissa M. Valle believe that it is not simply the disparity in socioeconomic class that has driven these people out of their neighborhood; she believes that these disparities are intertwined with racial hierarchies within Colombia and inflamed by a globalized economy. In her article, The discursive detachment of race from gentrification in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, Valle speaks of the cultural racism within the country, forced evacuations in the region, and uses Racial Attachment Processes (RAP) to show how racialized this gentrification process has been. She mentions coded language in interviews that shows just how developers, gentrifiers, as well as the Cartagena elite believe that as a community of poor Afro-descendants, those who are considered "native" to Getsemaní "do not have the economic, social, and cultural capital to make them worthy of staying in the neighborhood." [10] Both class and racial tensions have had a serious effect on the local community; tensions which were sparked with the rise of tourism in the area.

Generally, locals don't really see much use of the interior of the walled city other than for work because it does not offer them any opportunities for housing. The disparity in terms of social class and race between local and tourists is so immense, many of the people in the surrounding areas can't even afford to step foot in the Walled City and feel excluded from their own historic site that has been appropriated for the tourist to enjoy. The walls, ironically, have transformed from protection for Colombians, to a symbol for them to stay away.

Sustainability

The villages outside of the walled city face many challenges that those inside do not, and this includes concerns we are beginning to see with climate change and sustainability. There have been concerns of accumulation of garbage, overcrowding, flooding, and the clogging of sewage systems due to the lack of infrastructure for both tourists and locals. As mentioned previously, many of the villages outside of the walled city have seen raw sewage flow in the streets because of overuse in Cartagena. There is no governmental support to create suitable drainage, and very little advocacy for the villagers who hold the burden of Cartagena's popularity. Additionally, recycling in Cartagena has been labelled "an ecological disaster" by wildlife conservation consultant Thomas Lyster in conversation with The Bogotá Post"[9]. While some small businesses are taking matters into their own hands by investing in less wasteful initiatives, the government, again, seems more concerned with ensuring tourist satisfaction than creating sustainable ways for the city to develop.

Figure 6: Profile picture of Getsemaní Facebook Group against gentrification. Translates: Not For Sale.

Possible Solutions

Tourism is not inherently unsustainable, but in the Caribbean it has unfortunately become emblematic of countries' racist history, years of oppression, and unfathomable socio-economic disparities between the tourist and the local. From a design perspective however, there are some steps that can be taken to mitigate many of the issues stated above. For example, to enhance public and private cooperation, placemaking has proven to be a successful intervention to lessen the effect of 'othering' that are so prevalent in Cartagena. Ensuring that there are public spaces where local folk can come and destress after work and where a tourist can do the same after hours of walking in the cobblestone streets could become spaces where the two worlds could come together. Infrastructurally speaking, there is a lot of work left to be done in the hands of the local government because there needs to be serious improvement in sanitation.

Figure 7: Trash accumulated in neighborhoods outside of the Walled City.
Image from travel Blog.

Footnotes

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Figure [2]: Currie, Leonard J. (Leonard James), 1913-1996, Photographer: Currie, Leonard J. (Leonard James), 1913-1996. July, 1956, (photo taken). Fortaleza, Cartagena, Colombia. Original image: color slides. Place: Slide: University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, Digital file: University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS37059_37059_41065317.

Figure [3]: Cartagena, Maria Valentina. 2017. Palenquera en las Bovedas. Cartagena de Indias.

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Figure [5]: Chiva Experience in Cartagena . n.d. Discover Colombia. https://www.discovercolombiatravel.co/tours/chiva-experience-in-cartagena/.

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