The Tourism ‘Sprawl’ and Urban Changes in Rome (DRAFT)

Abstract
Being originally concentrated in the inner-city centre, tourism accommodation services have increasingly expanded in the last decades toward the semi-periphery and periphery of Rome. The tourism ‘sprawl’ is mostly the result of spontaneous decisions by firms and, partially, of deliberate urban planning strategies. Using historical data on the location of tourism attractions, hotels and other accommodation services, the research aims at analysing and interpreting the spatial distribution of tourism within the city of Rome in association with a wider set of urban changes, including suburbanization, the evolution of mobility and gentrification. The aim is to evaluate the main drivers of tourism decentralization and its impact on the centre and on the periphery and, finally, on urban tourism as a human experience.

Key words: urban tourism, periurbanization, location strategies, Rome, urban planning.

1. Introduction

Tourism accommodations services in metropolitan areas are usually concentrated in the inner city centre; this is especially true for historic cities and for the city of Rome (Fig. 1), due to the size of its historic centre and its well known ‘monocentrism’. “The orthodox image of a ‘timeless’ Rome has as its geographical corollary a sense of a functionally and symbolically dominant centre with a weak and underdeveloped periphery” (Agnew, 1995, p. 73). The continuous expansion of urban areas well outside of the historic centre has not altered the monocentrism of Rome but has rather perpetuated it on a wider scale. The concentration of such a pressure upon the city centre, being originated by tourists or by residents, it is usually supposed to be negative. Spatial planning strategies in Rome, and particularly its new Masterplan (PRG), are explicitly aimed at promoting ‘polycentrism’ through the location of ‘centralities’ in the periphery: new or renewed urbanizations with a 20% of spaces dedicated to non-residential functions (Comune di Roma 2003, p.16).

What role tourism is supposed to play in this frame? On the one hand tourism is considered to be one of the main responsible for the current monocentrism of Rome, being most of the ‘tourism city’ located within and around the historic centre. On the other hand the location of accommodation services in the new ‘centralities’, together with other services and functions, is supposed to favour polycentrism.

The article is intended to provide an overview of the spatial patterns that have historically guided the location of hotels and other tourism services in the city of Rome. The main areas of agglomeration are identified using kernel density functions. The aim is to evaluate the causes and effects behind the ‘touristicization’ of the various ‘quartieri’ of Rome, the different characteristics of accommodation services within and outside of the city centre, in terms of prices, size, typology of tourists and of the impact upon surrounding areas and on the city as a whole.

The idea is that the deconcentration of the accommodation capacity, rather then contributing to the decongestion of the city centre and to the economic revitalization of urban peripheries, is favouring a more general and qualitative evolution of urban tourism, changing the temporality of mobility within the city and leading to the de-territorialization of the urban experience, both in geographical and in economic terms.
Fig. 1 – Concentration of hotels in the centre of Rome, 1870-1962 (Kernel, r: 250 mt)

Source: own data¹
2. The ‘touristicization’ of Rome within and outside of the city centre, 1870-2005

Before the reunification of Italy and the election of the city as the State capital, Rome was limited in size and population. Within an highly historicized centre, it contained all the contradiction of a modern city, with low-income residents living in low quality and overcrowded houses in the ‘rioni’ of the centre with narrower and darker streets, such as Trastevere, Campo Marzio, Monti, Celio. The capital city, and the middle and high-income residential areas were being built just outside of the city centre. Areas such as Prati, Nomentano, Parioli, Esquilino, Aventino, were immediately chosen as privileged sites for the location of new and more modern hotels just after the construction of these ‘quartieri’, or in the next decades (see Tab. 1).

The continuous afflux of higher-income population in the old ‘rioni’ of the centre has led to the gentrification of these areas, with the displacement of most of their traditional inhabitants and the consequent location of hotels. The timing of gentrification of these areas correspond to their ‘touristicization’, as shown in table 1. This led to the formation of a continuous and more or less homogenous concentration of tourism facilities all over the city centre, outside of the traditional ‘triangle’ of concentration between Piazza del Popolo, Piazza di Spagna and the Pantheon (Fig. 3). The density of hotels throughout the city centre shows two main polarizations: one in the above mentioned triangle and the other along the axis between the historic centre and the main railway station (Termini), in the Esquilino, with this latter area continuing increasing its centrality in the next decades.

Other low-income areas where planned in the inner periphery, like Testaccio, before world-war I, and Garbatella, Tuscolano, Ostiens, Latino, Quadraro, Torpignattara, etc. in between the tow world wars. Some of these ‘quartieri popolari’ were intended, as well, to guest the population of the ‘rioni’ that had to be removed after the ‘sventramenti’ of the centre (Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Via della Conciliazione, Via dei Fori Imperiali, etc.). These areas have being built with better planning standards in comparison to the disordered urban development of

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1 Data presented in this and in the following sections have been mostly collected from primary sources: historic data on the location of hotels in Rome from 1870 to 1980 have been collected in the frame of the research project “L’industria dell’ospitalità a Roma. Secoli XIX-XX.”, coordinated by Prof. Girelli Bocci, using the “Guida Monaci” travel book (Girelli Bocci, 2006); other data have been collected and geocodified by me, with the collaboration of Raffaella Coletti, Iridania de Aza, Francesco Olivieri, Silvia Caccarelli, Francesca Palombi, Silvia Piconcelli and Rosario Pavone, from a multiplicity of sources, and particularly: Provincia di Roma (bed & breakfast); Touring Club (tourism attractions); Praxis 2004 (tourism centralities).
the periphery occurred during the ‘50s and ‘60s. They have followed different trajectories of urban development. Some of them have gentrified, like Garbatella and Testaccio, but while the first shows a concentration of hotels, Testaccio still remains untouched by tourism, due to its ability to maintain its original character up to now. Gentrification processes are occurring, to a lesser extent, as well in the Tuscolano, Latino, Monte Sacro, but this is not yet followed by the ‘touristicization’ of these areas. The case of Rome doesn’t show a strict correlation between gentrification and the ‘touristicization’ of urban neighborhoods. The latter is, probably, more a consequence then a cause to gentrification.

**Tab. 1. Urbanization and touristicization in the ‘zone urbanistiche’ of Rome, 1870-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touristicization (Hotels)</th>
<th>1870, 1910</th>
<th>1925, 1940</th>
<th>1962</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2015*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testaccio</td>
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<td>Della Vittoria, Paratici</td>
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<td>Aventino</td>
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<td>Ostiense</td>
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<td>Casilino, Latino, Quadraro, Monte Sacro, Torpignattara, etc.</td>
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<td>Flaminio, S.Lorenzo, Trieste, Nomentano</td>
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<td>Girotta Rossa, P.le d.Esti, Val Convento</td>
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<td>Salaria, Buon Pastore, Tor Vergata, Primavalle</td>
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<td>Cinecittà, Giardini, La Rustica, Pietralata, S. Basilio, Tor Sapienza</td>
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<td>Appio, Via Salaria, Buon Pastore, Tor Sapienza, etc.</td>
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<td>Aurelio, Gianicolense, Aurelio, Medaglie d'Oro</td>
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<td>Giustiniana, Spinaceto, Tor di Quarto Sertecamini</td>
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<td>Labaro, La Storta, Morena, Settebagni, V.Giuliano, S.Aca., Vallecarno</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grotta Rossa Est, Pian Due Torri, Serpentara</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corviale, Bupacotta, Bocca, Portuense, Torlino, Val Melaina, Pineta Porta, Laurentino, etc.</td>
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<td>Acilia, Fabro, Castelluccia, L养护, Romanina, Pianello di Grano, S.Vittorio</td>
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<td>Pisano</td>
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<td>* Tourism centralities in the new Masterplan, as in Praxis, 2004</td>
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**Source:** own data, Istat

Especially during the fifties and sixties, as during the whole century, Rome had to accommodate to an increasing immigration of population ranging from middle-income and ‘white collar’ workers of an expanding public sector, to low-income immigrants coming from southern regions in search of a job in the building sector, into the limited range of industries or in private low rent services. The first category have been mainly located in the northern and western quadrants of the city (Aurelia, Tor di Quinto, Salaria, Trionfale, etc.), that have been almost immediately populated by hotels. Low-income areas have mostly been located in the eastern quadrant, along the axis of Tiburtina, Casilina, Princesina and Appia, or in the south (Marconi and Portuense), with a notable increase in density rates and an increasingly chaotic, unplanned and uncontrolled urban development (Marcelloni 2003).
Fig. 3 – Concentration of hotels in Rome, 1940-1962 (Kernel, r: 1.000 Mt)

Source: own data

1940

1962
Fig. 4 – Concentration of hotels in Rome, 1980-2005 (Kernel, r: 1.000 Mt)

Source: own data

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Until the ’50s the increase in the accommodation capacity has led to a contiguous expansion of the ‘tourism city’ in the areas near-by the centre. Even after the sixties and until today the extent and the shape of this central tourism city has remained almost the same, with little variations. Due to an increasing number of tourism arrivals the level of hotels density, in this central area, continued increasing during the whole century, reaching its peak in 1980. Tourism arrivals as well reached their peak in 1985.

After the ’60s, the polarization of hotels in the historic centre has lost its primate in favour of an increasing concentration of structures around the railway station of ‘Termini’; even in this area, maximum hotels density rates have decreased in the ’80s and ’90s. The rise in the accommodation capacity, however, has not led to a further and smooth expansion of the ‘tourism city’, but rather to the dispersion of an increasing number of structures out of the inner periphery and to the outer rings. The location strategies of hotels in the last three decades have contributed to the ‘sprawl’ of tourism structures well outside of the historical area of concentration, due to the saturation of the city centre, rising costs of central locations and for many other reasons related on the one hand to the internal transformation of the hospitality industry, and on the other hand to the changing patterns of urban development and the periurbanization of Rome.

The distribution of accommodation services in this outer city it’s much more scattered and dispersed. Notwithstanding the expansion of the accommodation capacity out of the inner city centre, hotels in the periphery do not show an high degree of concentration and polarization, as to lead to the formation of new tourism poles; with the only exceptions of Aurelia and EUR, where the location of a large number of high-capacity hotels have led to the formation of a considerable concentration of structures. The Aurelia axis and the EUR, have been the first peripheral areas to ‘touristicize’, even before the sixties, and still remain the main areas of hotels concentration outside of the city centre, being the first particularly near to Vatican City and the second on the axis between the centre and the city international airport of Fiumicino.

Out of these new areas of concentration other decentralized spots have developed in Grotta Rossa, Giustiniana, Spinaceto, Settecamini, during the sixties and seventies; and in Salaria, Tor Vergata, Labaro, La Storta, Settebagni and many others areas in the eighties and nineties (see Tab. 1). These areas are new or almost new residential neighborhoods developed in proximity to highways and transport gateways, mainly along the road ring (Grande Raccordo Anulare).

Another strategy for accommodating an increasing number of tourists, has been that of diversifying the hospitality system. Beside hotels and more traditional typologies of accommodation services (like ‘case per ospitalità religiosa’), bed & breakfast have, for example, multiplied in the last ten years and are actually more the one thousand (Fig. 5). The spatial distribution of these kind of accommodation services has paradoxical effects on the geography of urban tourism. On the one hand they are more dispersed and are more equally distributed all over the city centre, allowing the touristization of previously empty areas. On the other hand, being smaller and having less locational costs, they contribute to maintain the concentration of tourists in the city centre.

The inner periphery, and especially the eastern quadrant, have been almost completely by-passed by the hotel industry. ‘De-touristicized’ space includes:

- High density urbanizations developed ’50s and ’60, along the main transport axis, with a commercial base and a certain degree of multi-functionality, but with very low architectural and planning standards; these private developments where anyway accompanied and mixed with public-funded developments allowing to endow the new ‘quartieri’ with squares, green areas and other public spaces and infrastructure.
- High density complexes of public-funded ‘edilizia popolare’, developed in the ’70s: good examples of so called “planning disasters” (Hall 1982), and still some of the most problematic peripheries of Rome.
- Privately built illegal settlements (‘nuclei abusivi’). The rise of uncontrolled, is a recurrent and increasingly ordinary method for the urban development of Rome, leading to even worst results.

Even the more high-income and gentrified neighborhoods in these areas, especially in the eastern quadrant between Tiburtina and Appia, suffer in this regard from being surrounded by a deprived, disordered periphery, and have been excluded from the benefit of tourism development.

**Fig. 5 – Concentration of bed & breakfasts in Rome, 2006** (Kernel, r: 1.000 Mt)

3. Exurban tourism and urban planning in Rome

The new Masterplan has been based on a subdivision of the city into three zones: the ‘consolidated city’, including the centre and the ‘historic periphery’, with minimal changes allowed; the ‘unchangeable city’, including protected areas, urban parks and other regulated spaces, that are supposed to remain untouched; and finally the ‘changing city’ (*città in trasformazione*), including both urbanized and non-urbanized areas. It is this latter the main target of the plan. The key term is ‘polycentrism’: several ‘centralities’ are identified in this outer periphery that are intended to guest a range of services, economic activities and leisure facilities, favouring the polarization of the surrounding residential areas and the promotion of multi-functionality. The aim is to reconnect this outer periphery while decreasing the congestion of the city centre.
Rather than acting on existing city areas, also due to the high cost of expropriations, new developments in Rome have traditionally occupied new empty spaces. In the last 40 years the urbanized space in Rome have grown at a rate of 260%. The new plan allows the expansion of the urban area of an additional 36% (Italia nostra, 2003). Planning authorities continue to base their decision on a population that in 1963, the time where the previous Masterplan have been approved, was expected to reach 5 millions of inhabitants. Population in Rome it’s rather declining and well below 3 millions of inhabitants, due to perurbanization and low fertility rates that are not equated by the inflows of a large number of immigrants.

The new centralities are dominated by shopping malls (some of the largest in Europe), which were previously very rare in Rome. They guest other commercial and economic activities and, to a lesser extent, congress facilities and so-called ‘cultural poles’ (for example the universities of Tor Vergata and Roma 3, in Ostiense), and finally accommodation services. In the Masterplan documents the areas of Pietralata and Prenestino (eastern quadrant), Ostiense (south) and Acilia (south, out of the road), were indicated as optimal areas for the location of hotels. Having not been approved by the Regional council, the implementation of the Masterplan has been based on ‘strategic agreements’ (Accordi di Programma), negotiated between the municipality and the private developers that are supposed to bear some of the costs of urbanization. Such a modality of planning has been widely criticized, due to the overwhelming role of private investors, and make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the composition of these ‘new centralities’, some of which still need to be planned or built.

Fig. 6 – Concentration of hotels and new tourism “centralities” in the PRG

The ‘tourism centralities’ indicated in the above map (Fig. 6) have been extracted from a study commissioned by the Comune di Roma (Praxis 2004). The map allows to distinguish
between different categories of areas chosen for the location of new accommodation services (see Tab.1):

a) pre-war and medium density area, like Ostiense,

b) high density peripheries developed during the fifties and sixties: Centocelle, Gordiani, Portuense, etc.;

c) the most of these new tourism centralities are to be found along transport axis or near transport gateways (Fig. 6);

Tourism centralities in the eastern quadrant and in other older peripheries (type b), may be difficult to implement. These areas have traditionally remained empty from tourism, and will probably continue to do so. More central locations would surely be favoured, allowing a further expansion of the tourism city. The connection between this kind of areas and tourism development is not so strong, however, both in the Masterplan and in other urban policies. Only two of the many ‘tourism centralities’ of the PRG, Ostiense and Pietralata, belong to this category, while most of the centralities are located in the more high density and deprived urban areas that surround them. In an analysis of ‘contratti di quartiere’ (tools aimed at the urban renewal and at the economic revitalization of peripheral neighbourhoods), only the areas of Pigneto, San Lorenzo and Garbatella are more or less oriented toward the location of hotels or the valorisation of their tourism attractiveness.

The new accommodation capacity is concentrated near-by road transport gateways (type c), and may be favoured by the increasing importance of these kind of location in contemporary urban tourism.

The evaluation of this spatial strategy has to be framed into a wider discussion of the effects of this new geography of accommodation on the surrounding areas, on the tourism system, and on the city as a whole.

3. Centre, periphery and locational patterns of accommodation services in Rome

The distribution of accommodation services within cities has been interpreted using land-use models, or in the frame of the city’s historic evolution (Shoval 2006). According to land-use models central location are preferable due to tourists will to pay more for an easy access to the city centre (Yokeno 1968). The prices of hotels of the same category and of a similar quality would then be higher for a centrally located hotel than for a peripheral one. Such an hypothesis has been successfully tested, for example, for the city of Jerusalem (Shoval 2006). According to the second strand of models, hotels in the historic centre are supposed to be small, cheaper and less qualified, while large and luxury hotels tend to locate in the inner periphery, just outside of the historic city, an area defined by Ashworth as the ‘transitional zone’ (Ashworth 1989) or, more recently, near the main transport gateways. The two set of explanations are not necessarily in contradiction. Medium-high quality hotels are difficult to find in the city centre due to their size and to the high cost of location in an already built urban space. The conversion of already existing buildings into hotels or the construction of large structures in the centre may be expensive or even impossible, due to planning standards and regulations. If this is true it is also true that, among the same category, the price of accommodation would be higher in the centre than in the periphery.

In Rome prices tend to decrease with the distance from the centre, and larger hotels are concentrated outside of the historic centre. Five stars and luxury hotels are however, as in other cities (Egan-Nield, 2000), concentrated in the inner centre; the highest prices, on the average, are not to be found in the historic centre but rather in the ‘transitional zone’, corresponding in Rome to the area around the inner road ring (‘anello ferroviario’). On the other hand the value of central locations allows central hotels to exploit a considerable ‘locational advantage’. Within the same category of hotels and even on the overall, the price of a double room shows a correlation with the distance from the centre, which is more
pronounced for higher categories (Fig. 7). Luxury hotels have been excluded from the analysis as long as they don’t show an high sensibility to the distance from the centre.

The case of other cities shows, moreover, in the last decades, a progressive dispersion of accommodation services outside the city centre and into the outer periphery, together with the increasing importance of accessibility and transport gateways for the location of accommodation services. Almost paradoxically, an easy accessibility to the transport network is valued more over time, while the distance from tourism attractions matters less and the disadvantages of being distant decline. Such an evolution has been registered in very different situations, ranging from the Chinese city of Xiamen (Bégin 2000) to the Niagara Falls (Ingram-Inman 1996), and it contributes to an increasing decentralization of accommodation services.

Fig. 7. Hotels' price and distance from the centre of Rome per category (stars), 2005

Other regularities have been found in other cities, and are confirmed in the case of Rome (Fig. 8): the number of group tourists, and the number of business tourists, tends to be lower in central locations, which are characterized by a higher number of individual tourists and leisure tourists. The strongest correlation seems however to relate the nationality of tourists with the distance from the centre.
Fig. 8. Categories of tourists and location of hotels in Rome, 2005

Source: direct survey

Fig. 9 – Distribution and characteristics of hotels in the ‘zone urbanistiche’ of Rome, 2005

Source: own data

2 Data presented in fig. 10, 12, 13 have been collected among a sample of 138 hotels in Rome, with the support of the Ufficio di Statistica of the Comune di Roma.
Such regularities do not allow the definition of any general rule about the distribution of hotels based solely on the value of land and on the distance from the centre. The distribution of accommodation services in Rome doesn’t follow a concentric model (see also Fig. 9). The analysis shows, in line with the work of Ashworth and Tunbridge (1994), how the historical evolution of the tourist city may lead to the formation of specialized areas having different typologies of accommodation services and different categories of tourists.

Central hotels would not only host a higher percentage of individual and self-organized tourists, leisure tourists and strangers; they will also have, for example, a different cost structure (Fig. 10): the cost of location (rent costs) decreases in the periphery, as well as the cost of maintenance and of a wide range of other services.

The impact of this different typologies of accommodation services and their relation to urban development in general has not been so frequently discussed.

In what follows I will try to outline some of the points that, in my view, should be included in such an analysis, in an attempt at evaluating the benefits and costs of tourism decentralization:

A) Agglomeration effects - The location of hotels in the centre of Rome leads to the formation of considerable concentrations of firms, while clusters of this kind are rare in peripheral locations. The differentiated advantages of central vs. peripheral location is dependent upon the value of so called agglomeration economies in the hotel industry. Being services offering similar products autonomously from each other, hotels are not likely to benefit from the usual set of agglomeration advantages that benefit inter-linked production industries, like specialization, complementarities and information flows (Chung-Kalnins 2001). Hotels would only marginally benefit from production-based externalities but demand-based externalities may be extremely important. In cases, such as self-organized tourism, where consumers have limited information and they need to personally inspect goods for making their choices, physical proximity helps customers to evaluate their options and to make the best choice. Hotels signalling their existence through advertising or other kinds of information services would attract tourists in the area and would consequently benefit the other hotels located near-by. Such advantages would decrease if hotels located in proximity are all similar to each other, due to an excessive competition. Proximity favours the differentiation of hotels within urban tourism clusters, as it has been shown in the case of Manhattan (Baum-Haveman 1997) and Madrid (Urtasun-Gutiérrez 2006): new hotels locate sufficiently close to established hotels to benefit from agglomeration economies, while positioning on a different market segment to avoid localized competition. Hotels located in the periphery, moreover, would need to bear the costs of an autonomous advertising and marketing, that larger structures or hotel chains can afford more easily. Central locations, finally, would be preferred by self-organized and other typologies of tourists that base their decisions on a daily base and through their direct observation.
B) Internalization/externalization - Hotels in the periphery are larger, and tend to internalise many activities and services that in central locations may be externalised, or absent. On the one hand the lower cost of location allows hotels to grow in size and, consequently, increases the convenience of internalisation. On the other hand, being located in exurban spaces with a minimal supply of services and in isolation from other similar structures, they will need not only to internalise publishing and signalling, as shown above, but also many others services, from the most common, like catering or laundry, to the more rare, as well as the cost of being distant from the centre, for example providing transport services to the costumers (Fig. 11). Finally, being located in areas with a low urban quality, lacking any form of attraction or services available for tourists, such structures would need, more generally, to provide these services internally and isolate from the surrounding areas.

Fig. 11. Services available per size of hotels in Rome, 2004

* No data available for externalisation
Source: direct survey

Hotels of this kind will prefer not to locate within exurban residential neighborhoods, but rather in the interstitial spaces which have been left empty by urban development. The physical isolation of such structures correspond to their functional autonomy and to their economic isolation. The internalisation of anything the structure or its costumers need, would decrease the interdependencies of the hotel with the surrounding area and, consequently, its local impact. We can add to this picture the fact that such hotels are not locally owned, as it is common in the centre, and are more frequently own by large firms or are part of a chain. Peripheral hotels would be, more generally, weakly embedded in their area of location, with an economic impact limited to employment creation and with all the limits usually associated to this kind of exogenous development model (see Markusen 1996).
C) Tourism mobility and the urban experience - The decentralization of accommodation services influences not only the geography of cities and the organization of the tourism industry: it has an impact on the evolution of urban tourism as a human experience, mainly due to the changing temporality of tourism mobility within the city.

The sprawl of tourism accommodation in the periphery is not a solution to the congestion of city centres, as long as tourism attractions continue to be located in the centre (Fig. 12). The agglomeration of hotels outside of the city centre has no correlation with the distribution of the few exurban attractions, like the Ostia archaeological site or Via Appia, which are surrounded by urban parks.

![Fig. 12. Concentration of tourism attractions in Rome, 2006](Source: own data)

The same applies to business tourism; the growth of residential areas outside the city centre, in Rome, has being accompanied by a slower deconcentration of economic functions and public functions especially; with the sole exception of EUR and of some major transport axis, economic activities have remained concentrated in the older city resulting in the development of a mono-functional periphery and in an increasing monocentrism.

The sprawl of accommodation services, in this frame, may even have the effect of increasing the congestion of the centre and, more generally, it has an impact on the movement of tourists within the city, which is increasingly accommodated by public or private motor transport. The speeding of tourism mobility within the city is also due to increasingly short travels. The average length of stay of tourists in Rome has impressively and constantly decreased in the last decades, reaching an average of one and a half day. Accommodation services are more dispersed while the time available for the visit get shorter, and consequently the places to visit get fewer. Tourists in Rome are consequently increasingly polarized between the two poles of long distance and anonymous locations.
where tourists reside and sleep, and a decreasing number of tourism attractions that, due to the limited time available, tourists are able to visit.

Such a time-space compression is an expression of a more general evolution of the modalities of production and consumption (Harvey 1996): tourism is a paradigmatic expression of such a compression. “Contemporary tourists are collectors of gazes. They are less interested in visiting the same place year after year. The first gaze is what counts” (Urry 1990, p. 34). The organization of contemporary urban tourism expresses one of the main dimensions of de-territorialisation: the weakening of a direct relation between individuals and their environment, that gets mediated by signals (Raffestin 1984). “The tourist gaze is increasingly signposted. There are markers which identify what things and places are worthy of our gaze. Such signposting identifies a relatively small number of tourist nodes” (Urry 1990, p. 35). Urban tourists are moving increasingly fast and are highly selective in time and space. Not only the geography but also the economy of tourism flows is increasingly selective and a-spatial.

Within the city centre an increasing number of tourists is ever more polarized into a few overcrowded locations which get dominated by tourists: they have to convert their commercial and urban base to accommodate visitors’ needs, and become ‘tourist bubbles’ (Judd 1999). The size of the historic centre of Rome have traditionally helped avoiding the overwhelming polarization of tourism in a few privileged hot spots. The experience of other cities shows how such a concentration of tourists in historic neighbourhoods may lead to the standardization of urban space, its commodification, the distortion of local history and gentrification (Fotsch 2004).

Such processes are today extended and generalized all over the urban centre, and not only in a few gentrified districts (Smith 2002). As the city gets bigger and globalized, the symbolic and economic value of being in the centre grows, together with the cost of space3, contributing to congestion and to a further depopulation of the centre. Long term residents are replaced by short or very-short term visitors and city users with an high spending capacity. Not only old low-income inhabitants, but even high-income and post-gentrification inhabitants escape from the centre in favour of cheaper and more quiet residential districts, also due to the increasing supply of such spaces. Is the whole city centre of Rome becoming a ‘tourism bubble’?

Outside of the city centre tourists are increasingly caught into non-places (Augè 1995). Urban strategies may be successful in providing the new peripheries with a commercial base and even with tourism attractions. But they cannot decentralize the historic city. What tourists are supposed to find in exurban spaces? Theme parks, tourist shopping villages, factory outlet malls, golf and touring courses (Weaver 2005). Such places, as well as the large hotels which are being built in exurban spaces, are not only “the dominant expression of a post-industrial cultural landscape” (p. 23), but rather post-urban non-places. The formation of non-places has not only an impact on the aesthetic and on the ethic of the urban experience, both for tourists and for residents, but also on the distribution of the benefits and of the costs of tourism development.

It has an impact, finally, on the competitiveness of Rome as a tourism destination. Tourists know too well what policy makers seem to forget: congress centres or trade fairs may be replicated in other places, while it would be impossible to imitate the uniqueness of the historic legacy of Rome. Those who can afford it, will continue to pay for being ‘there’, and will catch the best gazes.

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3 The growth of housing costs in Rome has been the highest in Europe in the last 15 years; in the ‘quartieri’ of the centre and of the inner periphery the growth ranges from 100% to more then 300% from 1994 to 2006 (Source: Gabetti Ufficio Studi), at the same level of Paris and London.
References


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