The precinct experience: a phenomenological approach

Bruce Hayllar

Tony Griffin

Author Details:

Affiliation:     School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism

                 University of Technology, Sydney

Address:     PO Box 222 Lindfield, NSW, 2070, Australia

Facsimile:     02 9514 5140

Telephone:     02 9514 5494 (BH)

Email:     Bruce.Haylar@uts.edu.au

                 Tony Griffin@uts.edu.au

**ABSTRACT**

An examination of the extant literature relating to urban tourism in general, and historic precincts in particular, highlights the predominantly structural and functional nature of existing research. Issues such as spatial form, land-use mix, development processes, management, marketing, economic impact and accommodation are recurring themes. While such studies have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of many utilitarian themes surrounding tourism precinct development and management, there is a dearth of material as to how such places are experienced by tourists. This study sought to redress the above shortcomings and applied a phenomenological framework to investigate the nature of the tourist experience in The Rocks historic precinct in Sydney, Australia. Twenty in-depth interview sessions, comprising a total of 31 participants, were undertaken with visitors to The Rocks over a one-week period in the summer of 2001. The interview subjects were predominantly international tourists who were first time visitors to The Rocks. Three central themes were developed from the interviews: Atmosphere, Physical Place and History. A total of 8 sub-themes emerged that more fully explicated the tourist experience. Utilising these themes and sub-themes as a basis for further analysis with co-investigators, the essences of the tourist experience were identified as Intimacy and Authenticity. Linking these two was the 'general' essence of a Sense of Place which represented a type of phenomenological dualism: the marking out of the Rocks as place that in part defined Sydney; and the intrinsic experience that The Rocks in itself provides.

# THE PRECINCT EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

## INTRODUCTION

The study of tourism as an urban phenomenon has burgeoned in recent years (Law, 1993; Page, 1995; Tyler, Guerrier & Robertson, 1999) as has the consideration of tourist precincts within cities. A tourism precinct represents a distinctive geographic area within a larger urban area, characterised by a concentration of tourist-related land uses, activities and visitation, with fairly definable boundaries. Such precincts generally possess a distinctive character by virtue of their mixture of activities and land uses, such as restaurants, attractions and nightlife, their physical or architectural fabric, especially the dominance of historic buildings, or their connection to a particular cultural or ethnic group within the city. Such characteristics also exist in combination.

The study of urban tourism precincts has traditionally been approached from a geographic or urban planning perspective (Stansfield, 1970; Wall, 1980; Ashworth, 1985; Law, 1985; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Meyer-Arendt, 1990). In the last decade, as interest in and research on urban tourism has increased (Griffin, Huyskens & Veal, 2000), so too have the approaches used to examine the phenomenon of urban tourism broadened. During the 1990s, while a major emphasis on a planning and geographic approach was evident (Burtenshaw, 1991; Getz, 1994, 1993a, 1993; Fagence, 1995; Pearce, 1998) other disciplinary perspectives began to emerge. An analysis of tourism precincts and their role in the lives of both locals and tourists from a sociological perspective was included in work by Mullins (1991), Conforti (1996) and Chang (1996). McDonnell and Darcy (1998) raised the notion of tourism precincts

functioning as part of the overall marketing strategy of destinations, although not specifically in an urban context, while Judd (1995) developed ideas around the economic development role of precincts. Indeed the increasing recognition of the role that tourism plays in the economy has resulted in numerous government initiatives and public-private sector partnerships to facilitate tourism development in general and tourism precincts in particular. The festival market place (Rowe and Stephenson, 1994) is perhaps the archetypal example of public-private sector partnerships, which have usually been focussed on the redevelopment of redundant industrial areas (typically but not exclusively developed around waterfronts, for example Baltimore, Boston, Sydney's Darling Harbour and Melbourne's Docklands).

Viewed overall, research on urban tourism precincts has predominantly focused on: their role in the tourism attractions mix; their physical and functional forms; their economic significance; their role as a catalyst for urban renewal; descriptive studies of their evolution and associated development processes; and, perhaps more broadly, their role, locality and function within the context of urban planning.

The study reported in this paper is a departure from each of the research 'traditions' briefly outlined above. In our view, there is limited research material (with the notable exceptions of the relatively recent work of Masberg & Silverman, 1996; Beeho & Prentice, 1997; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Wickens, 2002) focussing on the experience of tourists within these precincts. While studies have examined tourist pathways through precincts, tourist expenditure patterns, and a range of socio-demographic characteristics of tourists within precincts, developing an understanding

of the 'precinct experience' from the tourist's perspective has been a neglected dimension. Using *The Rocks* historic precinct in Sydney, Australia as a case study, this project set out to examine the precinct experience of visitors to this historic area using an approach grounded in phenomenology. Understanding how the tourist experiences a precinct, and in particular the attributes, both tangible and intangible, which engender a certain quality to the experience, can produce implications for the effective and appropriate planning, development, management and marketing of the precinct. To maintain the quality of experience those key attributes must be recognised, protected and fostered by precinct management authorities, which in turn will contribute to sustaining the viability of the precinct as an appealing place for tourists. Some such implications emerge from this paper, although these are not fully developed – that is to be the subject of further work by the authors.

**METHODOLOGY**

**The Phenomenological Approach**

Phenomenology as an approach to research has gained increased currency, particularly in those disciplines where the focus is on understanding human experience within a particular living context (see Crotty 1996, 1998). According to Merleau-Ponty (1986,p.vii), phenomenology 'tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide.'

Van Manen (1990, p.36) argues that the 'aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that

the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience'. More eloquently he notes that 'there is a determinate reality-appreciation in the flow of living and experiencing life's breath. Thus a lived experience has a certain essence, a "quality" that we recognise in retrospect'(Van Manen, 1990, p.36).

The method adopted in this study is primarily hermeneutic phenomenology. It attempts to be descriptive, to show how things look, to let things 'speak for themselves' and, in the context of the hermeneutic project, it is interpretive. While there may be, at first glance, an implicit contradiction between description and interpretation, this may be resolved 'if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process' (Van Manen, 1990, p.180). Denzin (1989, p.53) too notes the hermeneutic nature of interpretive research when he argues that:

> Interpretive research enters the hermeneutic circle by placing the researcher and subject in the center (sic) of the research process…The subject who tells a self- or personal experience story is, of course, at the center of the life that is told about. The researcher who reads and interprets a self-story is at the center of his or her interpretation of that story. Two interpretive structures thus interface one another.

Van Manen (1990) suggests four methodological practices for hermeneutic phenomenological writing. In summary these practices are:

*Turning toward lived experience*

To 'do' phenomenological research requires orienting one's thinking toward the questions: what is something really like, what is the nature of the lived experience, what is it about this phenomenon that sets it apart from similar or like phenomena? In turning toward lived experience the researcher needs to 'bracket' his or her prior experience. Bracketing requires the laying aside or 'suspension' of our understandings, assumptions and previous knowledge of the experience under investigation in order to approach it with fresh insight (Husserl, 1973). Arguably this suspension of belief allows us 'to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character' (Van Manen, 1990, p.47).

*Investigating the experience as lived*

This practice points to the use of methods appropriate to yielding data suitable for phenomenological analysis. The major source of data for this project was a series of in-depth interviews.

*Reflecting on Essential Themes*

Moving from data collection to data interpretation involves a process of phenomenological reflection (Van Manen, 1990). The grasping, elucidating or explicating of the essential characteristics of an experience is the basis of the phenomenological endeavour. Reflection and interpretation are the means to that end.

The first step in phenomenological reflection is to conduct thematic analysis which helps give a degree of order and control to the task. Ultimately the interpretive purpose of 'theme' is to determine the experiential structures that constitute the experience.

Denzin (1989) also suggests the use of theme in his approach to data interpretation. Invoking the post-modern idiom, he argues that following bracketing, a process of 'construction' that 'classifies, orders, and reassembles the phenomenon back into a coherent whole' takes place…Its goal is 'to re-create lived experience in terms of its constituent analytic elements' (Denzin, 1989, pp.58-59). 'Construction' accords metaphorically with the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962) who recommends assembling 'lived facts' in order to find essential meaning within all of them.

Reflecting on themes and 'working' the text is a dialectical process between the text, the researcher and the writing endeavour. Van Manen (1990) suggests that collaboration and the maintenance of a dialogue with a 'co-investigator' helps ensure that the intended meanings and understandings arising from a thematic analysis actually resonate with the experience of the participants.

*Writing and Rewriting*

To a large extent, the ideas of phenomenological reflection expressed above, and the writing task itself, are false dichotomies; writing and reflection are symbiotic tasks. Van Manen (1990) argues that the approach to writing should focus on maintaining an underlying sensitivity to the language, and through that, to the phenomenon being explored.

Denzin (1989) uses the term 'contextualisation' as his suggested mechanism for clarifying themes through the writing process. In the context of Denzin's interpretive project, contextualisation highlights the relationship between reflection, writing and the lifeworld. In this study cognisance has been taken of Moustakas' (1994) advice on the use of textual description as a way of identifying meaning and clarifying ideas.

In addition to these processes of epistemological practice, Van Manen (1990) also identifies what may be considered as principles that course through each of the above practices. These are:

*Maintaining a strong and oriented relation*

This principle is a warning to those writing phenomenology to ensure that their writing and interpretations remains oriented to the phenomenological questions under investigation. Van Manen (1990, p.33) notes that 'to be oriented to an object means that we are animated by the object in a full and human sense. To be strong in our orientation means that we will not settle for superficialities and falsities.'

*Considering parts and whole*

The final principle is concerned with ensuring that the interpretation is consistent with the various parts of the analysis. 'At several points it is necessary to step back and look at the total, at the contextual givens and how each of the parts needs to contribute toward the total' (Van Manen, 1990, pp.33-34)

Taken together, each of the practices and principles provide a workable methodological framework for a phenomenological study. However, an overriding question remains; how do we know that we have fully and faithfully explicated the phenomenon as experienced? Crotty (1996, p.169) notes that because of its epistemological underpinnings, phenomenology provides no objective outcomes in the way objectivity is understood within more positivistic paradigms. However, he argues 'there is a criterion we can point to. It consists in the very *'Aha!'* we give when we finally describe what is of the essence. We have sense that, at last, the description fits. We feel gripped by the phenomenon understood in the way we are describing it.' The *'Aha!'* described by Crotty mirrors the term used by Buytendijk (in Van Manen, 1990) to account for his own sense of completion: the "phenomenological nod". It is something we, or others with similar experiences, can clearly recognise.

**The Study Site**

'The Rocks' is located on the western side of Sydney Cove, directly opposite the Sydney Opera House and adjacent to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. On its southern boundary it is contiguous with Sydney's CBD, a location which has played a significant role in its historical development (Waitt, 2000). It is one of Sydney's most successful tourism precincts, receiving over 9 million visits in 2002, of which 65% were made by international tourists. Half of all international tourists to Sydney visit The Rocks at some time during their stay, making it the city's third most visited place behind Darling Harbour and the Opera House (SHFA fact sheet Mar-Dec2002).

The Rocks takes its name from the rocky outcrops that once dominated the western side of Sydney Cove. It is generally acknowledged as the site of the first

European settlement and as such is promoted to tourists as the 'Birthplace of Australia'. In the early days of the colony the area developed rapidly to house the workers serving in the neighbouring port. Today, The Rocks contains Australia's oldest extant private dwelling (Cadman's Cottage) and some of its earliest commercial buildings and warehouses. Tourism activities and land uses predominate, with few residents remaining, although the adjacent and largely uncommercialised area of Millers Point to the immediate west retains both its historic built fabric and a large resident population. The Rocks retains an historic 'feel' by virtue of its narrow laneways, cobbled streets and eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings that make up much of the area.

The history of The Rocks is both chequered and colourful. The site of Sydney's first pub and brothel, it developed a reputation for nefarious activities early in the nineteenth century. The gold rush years of the 1850s saw the emergence of the 'pushes', street gangs which persisted for the next century (Roddewig, 1978). In 1900 an outbreak of bubonic plague led to the demolition of a number of buildings and the resumption of all the land by the New South Wales government, in order to deal with rat infestations. The Maritime Services Board, the port authority for Sydney, took over control of the area and maintained that control for the next seventy years.

The key turning point in The Rocks' transformation from a poor, crime-ridden and physically blighted part of Sydney to one of its most appealing tourism precincts came in the 1960s, when the state government embarked on plans to substantially redevelop the area. The initial plans proposed razing much of the built fabric and redeveloping with high-rise office buildings. In 1970 the state government established

the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority (SCRA) to facilitate this process (Craig-Smith, 1995). SCRA was both landlord and planning authority, and charged with the task of carrying out the redevelopment and subsequently administering The Rocks on a self-funding, commercial basis. The redevelopment plans were ultimately frustrated by the combined opposition of residents and a construction workers' union, who placed what became known as a 'green ban' on demolition work in the precinct (Roddewig, 1978). In 1976 a new state government brought with it a revised agenda for urban planning and heritage protection in general, and The Rocks in particular. The emphasis was now to be on conserving the built heritage wherever feasible, and finding economic uses for the restored buildings. Tourism was seen as the main way in which this could be achieved.

Over the next decade or so, much of the historic built fabric was conserved and occupied by tourist-related uses – duty free and craft shops, restaurants and hotels. Some redevelopment occurred where the original buildings were beyond repair or not considered worthy of conservation. Development controls were introduced in an attempt to ensure that both new development and building restorations fitted within desired streetscape plans and maintained the character of the precinct. Opinions vary widely on the quality and authenticity of these efforts (Bennett, 1988; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000; Waitt, 2000). Reflecting the revised development philosophy of SCRA, the term 'Redevelopment' was eventually dropped, and the authority became simply the Sydney Cove Authority (SCA).

In 1999 SCA was replaced by a new statutory authority, the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA), whose responsibilities also embraced other key

harbourside tourism precincts. SHFA, however, is obliged to maintain a strong commercial focus. The Rocks must still largely fund itself, primarily through rental income from commercial tenants. As these rents are based substantially on retail turnover, SHFA seeks to encourage visitation to The Rocks as a means of maximising spending in the shops, pubs and restaurants, and hence the rents they receive.

**The Research Question**

In accord with the suggestion of Van Manen (1990) data collection and analysis for this study were guided by the phenomenological question: "What is the essence of The Rocks visitor experience?" As alluded to earlier, this question represents a significant gap in the knowledge base associated with urban tourism precincts, and answering it has the potential to produce significant implications for those involved in the planning, development, management and marketing of such precincts.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected by way of in-depth interview. To qualify for an interview, participants had to be international tourists or Australian residents (from outside of NSW) and first time visitors to The Rocks. The intent was to try and minimise the impact of previous knowledge and experience of The Rocks prior to the interview. Participants were all volunteers who responded to a display staffed by a research assistant located within The Rocks Visitors Centre. Respondents were encouraged to participate by the offer of two bottles of Australian wine. Each participant was informed that the interview would take up to one hour and be conducted in the Visitor

Centre seminar room. Permission was sought from each participant to tape record the interview. Data collection was conducted over a three-day period in March 2001.

**Participants**

Twenty interviews, involving 31 participants in total, were undertaken. Eleven participants were interviewed individually, seven in pairs and two in groups of three. First names (for the purposes of later identification on the tapes), age (in ten-year bands) and country of origin were collected. An overview of the participants is outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

**Approaching the Interpretation of Data**

Following the interviews, each of the interview tapes was transcribed and coded utilising the NUD*IST qualitative analysis software program.

In accord with the suggestions of Van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994) and Crotty (1996) the first 'level' of analysis undertaken was thematic. The three approaches recommended by Van Manen (1990) were used. Definitions for each theme were established as the data were worked and modified accordingly. Using the definitions and themes, a second researcher reviewed the texts and attributed themes. Variations and clarifications were then discussed and the themes modified where

appropriate. A follow up with a third member of the research team confirmed the reliability of the thematic analysis.

A textual description (Moustakas 1994) was then prepared which described the combined experiences of the visitors to The Rocks. The textual description used the text of participants to aid in developing a 'thick description' of the visit. (Geertz, 1973). This process facilitated further reflection and interrogation of the experiential elements through the thematic analysis.

Finally the analysis moved from description and theme to considerations of the essence of the phenomenon through the use of the 'particular' and 'general essence' (Spiegelberg 1982).

**Analysing the Data**

In the following analysis the first names of participants have been used. Direct quotes have been placed in italics and the line number(s) from the text noted. Line numbers provide an 'audit trail' back to the individual text saved within the NUD*IST document.

*A Textual Description*

Visitors arrive at The Rocks either with intent or, more usually, by chance. The responses below are typical:

*There's not a sort of sign that said "this is The Rocks", we just*

*sort of stumbled across it (Natalie: 167-168).*

*So I'm just walking around the city and I ended up here. I was spending some hours just in the Botanic Gardens so just as well, walk over and see how things are going (Praben: 8-11).*

*We were on a tour and our tour director told us about it. We went on a bus ride all around Sydney and as part of that she told us about this particular area (Nancy and Barry: 6-9).*

The Rocks has no clear point of entry. The most clearly defined is the extension of George Street, one of the city's most important north/south CBD arteries. At its northern end, George Street leaves the CBD as it crosses under an elevated railway line. At this crossing, a banner proclaiming 'Welcome to the Rocks', greets the visitor. However, given its height above eye level, the banner is not easily seen.

Other entry points are more diffuse. From the west, visitors may enter via the predominantly residential suburb of Millers Point. Twisted streets and non-descript walkways between houses typify this area. Only one respondent entered from this direction after a fragmented cross-town walk from nearby Darling Harbour.

More typically visitors enter from the east via Circular Quay. The 'Quay' is a tourist 'honey pot' site. It is close to the Opera House, Harbour Bridge, and harbour ferry terminals. Many coach tour operators use this area as a pick-up and drop off point. From Circular Quay visitors are drawn to The Rocks as they complete a traverse of the adjacent harbour foreshore.

The contrast in both the scale and relative ages of the buildings to the nearby CBD is immediately noticeable as is the change in the pace. Angus noted that *in the centre of the city it's like high buildings and very busy street but here is something different,* while Praben (90) said it *feels like a town village and downtown is a real city.*

The journey through The Rocks is in part determined by the visitors' motivation for their visit and in part by the opportunities the precinct presents once 'discovered'. Based on this combination of motivation and the way in which the precinct was used, three distinct types of visitor seemed to emerge. We have labelled these types *The Explorers*, *The Browsers* and *The Samplers*.

For some visitors, getting away from the main thoroughfare and into the heart of the 'old' Rocks is important (a group that we have collectively called *The Explorers*). In the immediate vicinity of the Visitors' Centre on George Street, The Rocks is quite bustling. Souvenir shops, boutiques selling Australian products and restaurants and cafés spread themselves along this thoroughfare. Leaving George Street and heading up the hill in a westerly direction, there is immediate respite from the cacophony of the main tourist area. Angus (107 – 111) observed that:

> *The narrow cobbled street is something you don't find in very many places and I think that's really part of its charm. You're walking along one street and then all of a sudden without realising it there's a kind of this little alleyway off to the left that might take you to something a bit more interesting around the corner.*

In a similar vein, Darlene (231, 232) commented *that you can just kind of explore behind the buildings and through the alleyways. It's fun. It's got wonderful energy.* Earlier she noted that if you wander *you never know, well you know you've got to come out somewhere, but I like the little streets (160, 161).* Joyce (218) discovered *all the stairs and different levels and all the stone stairways* while May (30 – 32) when entering the area *saw all these houses on top of each other and you could actually see them when you look at The Rocks and you can see where the houses have been. That was brilliant.*

These back streets also convey the 'living' Rocks *which is like a community, not just like packed up when people leave at night; it doesn't just shut down (Joyce: 454,455).* The living community gives The Rocks a unique character *where people are walking here and there, going to work and then you have people who are just strolling and looking all around (Darlene: 235).*

The journey to the back streets also gives a perspective on the interconnectedness of the historic development of the area. Salvator (257 – 262) talked of an

> *alleyway that's wide at the top and then narrows down the bottom, comes down to George Street and I was fascinated that it started out being called, I think Riley's Lane and then later on became something else, Reynolds's I think and then finally it became known as Suez Canal simply because its elevated and it looks like the original stuff and when it rains of course the water rushes down and that's how it became the Suez Canal.*

Other visitors are more content to stay within the confines of the main tourist area *(The Browsers)*. Their journey typically combines strolling along George Street and Playfair Street, a pedestrian thoroughfare containing places of historic interest and more restaurant and retail developments. Others visit the historic warehouses that have been converted to shopping and restaurant areas on the waterfront. Their experience of The Rocks does not have the depth of the Explorer but they are interested in capturing the experiential breadth of the precinct.

According to Caroline (61 – 64) the area has:

*kind of quaint little restaurants, little delis, little cafes –very relaxed, very casual and something you'd want to go and see if you just came off the boat or something [if] you were a little bit tired but didn't want to go home yet. It's a nice place to stroll around to relax and take a break.*

Nierke (155 – 157) expresses similar feelings when she comments that *it's pleasant to stroll around in and there are houses maybe from the beginning of the century.* Phillip (172, 173) too just *walks, sit, listen to the music* or calls into the local pub to *mix with people a little bit and that's quite nice.*

However, the significance of The Rocks in its overall historical context remains. The architecture, its colonial past and its role in preserving the history of Sydney is well recognised. Amanda (48) thought that the *monuments and the buildings are very English (48).* Angus (97,98) too saw cultural connections, noting

that the *architecture is quite colonial and that you notice the kind of old fashioned buildings.*

A third group appears to be focused on The Rocks more instrumentally (*The Samplers*). It is just another place to visit on the tourist trail. The Rocks provides a place where old Sydney can be seen, rather quickly, and where souvenirs and 'Australiana' can be purchased. Alternatively it is a place where some form of respite can be taken from the busy city that it abuts. In this sense visitors are using The Rocks as a type of refuge, a psychological foil to the nearby metropolis. As Amanda (284 – 287) comments: *there are people watching and just sort of sitting and taking a moment out of business I think. I think it's all about psychology and relaxation and what makes us feel comfortable, homely maybe.* Darlene (70 – 73) too juxtaposes her Rocks experience:

> *Basically we don't even like the big cities and I guess that's what's nice in this area. You're right in here and you have a feeling of being in a small area because you don't really see what's behind, what's out there even though we did walk all around. But you just have a small feeling about it, if that makes sense?*

While for the purposes of this treatment three different types of experience have been discussed, the analysis is more of a heuristic device to explicate types of experience. The dichotomies are somewhat false. The 'explorers' who walked the back streets are also 'browsers'. They too have strolled the main thoroughfare. It is apparent that while different types of experiences are undertaken, there would appear

to be physical and psychological overlays that course through each of the experiences. To unpack this experience further, the paper now turns to a more clearly defined thematic analysis.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Theme development inevitably involves data reduction - the thematic concept is sifted, disengaged and 'manufactured' from the text. However, given prior arguments concerning the interrelationships of the data, these themes should not be considered as mutually exclusive but rather as interpretive mechanisms within the hermeneutic focus of the study.

In analysing the data three major themes were identified: *Atmosphere,* the *Physical Place*, and *History*. The major themes and their categories are outlined in Table 3.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

### Theme 1: Atmosphere

The notion of *atmosphere* is a wholistic category that captures many of the ideas related to the 'feel' or affective dimension of the experience. Atmosphere is created through the visitors' interactions with the physical and social spaces of The Rocks; for example, the feelings of safety and security, the sense of its living nature, and the size and scale of its physical spaces. It is an intangible sense but perhaps one visitor captures it at least in part: *It's comfortable, it's easy, it doesn't take effort. I think that's what people want (Amanda: 363,364).*

*A Living Place*

The Rocks is an urban melting pot of international tourists, domestic tourists, local residents, office workers and Sydney residents in 'town' for the day. The area's businesses are predominantly tourism focussed but these are interspersed with resident services typical of any urban area. Similarly, while there are four and five star hotels with their international brands and polished entry ways, 200 metres away the day's washing hangs on the clothesline of an inner city dweller who may be a second or third generation Rocks resident. While some of these residences are not formally within The Rocks precinct, the adjacent Millers Point is more or less contiguous with the precinct. Adding to its living character is the local primary school which is less than 750 metres from George Street.

*Safety/Security*

The feeling of security in The Rocks helps visitors feel comfortable being in the area. There was *no rudeness. You don't have to be worry about not being safe. We were out walking after 10 o'clock at night and you don't feel threatened in any way or watching over your shoulder (Darlene: 241-242.)* Philip seems to reflect the dominant view when he notes that *we've felt very comfortable here all the time. We haven't had to worry about anything (269-270).*

While feelings of safety were the dominant view, it is interesting to note that the security cameras dotted around the area caused some to reflect whether security was indeed an issue – a somewhat counterintuitive response to the explicit intention of the precinct managers.

*Contrast*

One of the central characteristics that appears influential to producing the overall atmosphere of The Rocks is the extent to which its intrinsic physical and social character is juxtaposed to the nearby city. Indeed it is not only the city of Sydney to which it is juxtaposed, but also modern urban living : *lives are too fast here, especially in the cities. They are fast they give you no time to yourself (Amanda: 324, 325).* The Rocks is *less stressful, less people and yes, it's a good place to trot around the streets (Floriane: 128).* These comments were echoed by Nancy and Barry (143) when they noted that *here it's not as fast, we're not walking up and down as fast, or keeping up the pace that's there.*

The contrast in the pace of life is one dimension but there is also the physical contrast as Haile and Alan (19, 20) noted that when:

> *you are in the modern part of the city you can be anywhere in the world. You can just drop me there and say tell me where you are. I can't say – just like anywhere in the world. But those lovely little buildings. I don't know, I didn't have any information about them but they give a feeling.*

Nierke too commented on the contrast by way of its pace but also its contrast in scale and what that means for the experience. She liked that *it's relatively quiet. Not with all the large skyscrapers and things like that. Its more human measure (87, 88).*

It appears then that one of the defining characteristics of The Rocks is that of juxtaposition and definition. In juxtaposing itself to the rest of the city (in scale, pace, and style) the precinct both defines its character and shapes the experience of its visitors.

## Theme 2: Physical Place

### Architecture

Not surprisingly, comments relating to the architecture of the precinct were common. May noticed the way in which the architecture demonstrated change over time: *You can see the difference. You can see the different years. I don't mean separate years but you can see when they've had a different style or they've added to a building. You can see all the different parts, that's good (111 – 113).*

Some too commented on the preservation work undertaken to maintain the old buildings. Phillip for example found *this narrow little pub, beautiful architecture, sandwiched and obviously preserved between this modern building and this modern building. It was this beautiful old building that someone had the foresight to preserve. It was freshly painted and you could see all the design work on it (314 – 317).*

### Location

The location of The Rocks, close to the city and the main tourist routes and icons, was seen as a positive. Visitors could effectively walk there from any part of the city. Its aspect too, overlooking Circular Quay and adjacent to the Harbour Bridge and Opera House, gives the area a natural aesthetic appeal. The two characteristics of location are captured by Angus who commented that The Rocks *has got its own kind*

*of atmosphere about it being both the setting right next to the harbour, which for me was a much bigger pull, and The Rocks felt like a nice side attraction to visiting the harbour (175 – 178).*

*Shopping*

For many visitors The Rocks is a place to eat, drink and purchase goods - the latter with a specifically Australian identity. The goods and the nature of the shopping experience were both noted. Some were pleased that many of the goods were Australian made and *not Australian design made in China (Joyce: 262).* May liked the opportunity to buy aboriginal goods, and Natalie was particularly impressed with the prices because she *thought it would be very expensive and we've had a quick look and its not as bad as we thought (57, 58).*

Of interest too in terms of the total experience within The Rocks was the relaxed nature of customer service in the retail areas. Caroline commented that *you don't feel kind of hassled or pushed or given the kind of nudge to be going. They just kind of leave you alone; they're friendly (76, 77).* Angus voiced a similar sentiment noting that shop staff *let you browse around and didn't hassle you too much (68, 69).*

<u>*Theme 3: History*</u>

*Preservation vs Development*

The *raison d'etre* of The Rocks as a tourist precinct is predicated on its history. Like all historic precincts, The Rocks is partially captured in time. Its architecture and urban form link the present with the past. However, moving from its roots as a seaport to a tourist precinct has inevitably involved change. Achieving the

appropriate balance between maintaining the integrity of the area while embedding tourist infrastructure within the historic form is a complex process where competing values and priorities collide. Conservation, preservation and development are the volatile ingredients of these debates.

The ongoing debate notwithstanding, from the tourists' perspective there is a sense that The Rocks has been 'developed' appropriately. *I like what they've done to it. They haven't torn them down, they've used it, they've revitalised it (Joyce: 42, 43).* Natalie commented on the integration of the old with the new: *Obviously they've tried to keep the buildings quite traditional and the same but obviously commercial shops have moved into them so it's a cross in-between to give quite a nice atmosphere (88 – 90).*

There were some concerns that the area had become *a little bit too commercial (Salvator: 194, 195)* while others thought the balance had been tipped too far toward development in that the retail developments kind of *intrudes against the older aspects of it (Angus: 43).*

*Interpretation and Meaning*

The final category concerns how visitors come to interpret and understand the historic meaning of The Rocks. There were various levels of understanding. Some visitors were aware of its significance in the development of Sydney and the history of its preservation. For others, their understanding was more superficial, seeing it as simply a remnant of old Sydney.

**The Essence of Experience**

The analysis now moves toward a more phenomenological explication of the data; an engagement with the essences of experience, that is to 'the element or elements in the phenomenon' (Crotty, 1996, p.159).

Many of the themes developed above primarily reflect the experiential structure of the experience. However, essences are not particular actions, interactions or components within the physical and social environment. Rather an essence is a 'construct' that arises from the individual interaction with those components, i.e. how the phenomenon is experienced. Thus developing essences is a reconstructive or constructive act (Denzin, 1989).

Moving from experiential structures to experience involved a process of reading and reworking the ideas expressed within the texts. Further, it involved discussion and debate with co-researchers. This stage involves understanding the inherent 'whatness' of the identified themes. That is; what is being experienced in The Rocks?

As a first stage in the move to essence, we differentiate between the terms 'particular essence', to distinguish between underpinning experiences, and the 'general essence', which is a cumulative construct of the particular (Spiegelberg, 1982). In our analysis two particular essences have been identified: *intimacy* and *authenticity*

*Intimacy* links the principal ideas contained within the theme of *Atmosphere*. The more 'human scale' of the area provides a situational and social counterpoint to the nearby city. Here the pace of life is slowed. People browse without extrinsic direction, the pace of movement determined by the rhythms of the day. Laneways provide corridors to small 'out of the way' spaces. There is an escape, albeit for a short time, from modernity; form and function are reconfigured. Space is created for self.

Intimacy is experienced in great measure through interactions with the physical elements of The Rocks. However, its morphology is not the complete explanation - the social is also significant. Retail outlets are typically small and there is an unhurried, unpressured feel about them. While they are places to buy goods and services the interaction between vendor and shopper is more relational. Thus the 'distance' between the two is minimised.

*Authenticity* is a problematic construct within the tourism literature. However, in the context expressed here authenticity is not concerned with front stage, back stage dichotomies (MacCannell, 1976). Rather it is concerned with difference, that is to say how the city of Sydney sets itself apart from other modern cities. How it reveals its identity or at least, in part, the source of its identity as a distinctly Australian city.

The Rocks is marketed as the place where <u>it</u> all began. While the area has changed greatly in its more than 200 year history, there are still clearly identifiable vestiges of 'old Sydney': the wear and tear on cobbled lanes and stairways and small brick and stone buildings that bear the marks of the ages. To be sure these are

interspersed with buildings of a more recent time built in the style of the 'period'. However, while some lament the changes that have taken place, it would appear that there is still sufficient of 'the authentic' to psychologically mark out this area as different, as something with a discernible identity and authenticity. For some visitors the precinct marked itself as more authentic by virtue of the fact that it had been allowed to evolve over time, with different eras of architecture juxtaposed, rather than being preserved as a 'museum piece'.

While the *particular essences* (Spiegelberg, 1982) discussed above provide a sense of the phenomenon of the experience, there was a sense that in their identification we had not completely captured their cumulative structure. The following questions therefore arose: is there embedded within the precinct experience a phenomenon that links and flows through the experience? Is there an essence without which the experience of the precinct (as understood by the participants in this study) would cease to exist? In responding to these rhetorical questions we engaged in a process of thinking through the phenomenological character of the work to date. Further we engaged in a discursive process of data analysis and discussion between co-researchers. Emerging from these dialectical processes was a sense of the contested notion of *place* (see Relph, 1976; Canter, 1977; Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Agnew, 1989; Massey, 1995). *Place* seems to capture the essence of experience. It encapsulates the affective domain of experience through the thematic notion of atmosphere; *place* is psychologically experienced. Place also resonates with the cognitive domain in considerations of the historical and physical manifestations of experience. In so doing, *place* is cognitively experienced.

There is however a type of phenomenological dualism in the notion of place as experienced within The Rocks. At one level there is place as described above. At another, there is The Rocks as a marker that helps distinguish Sydney as a distinct entity; as a *place* similar, yet different, to other post modern cities. While The Rocks is unlikely to ever achieve the iconic status of its near neighbours, the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, it nevertheless appears to play an important role in framing the tourist experience of Sydney, possibly giving it more depth.

**Theorising the Phenomenon**

The notion of place is inherently problematic as a usable construct given its contested nature. This notwithstanding, *place* does seems theoretically and experientially resonant. In thinking through this notion it seemed to us that some consideration of how the experience of the precinct might be located within phenomenological theorising might be worthy of exploration. The work of Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970, 1973a, 1973b,1975, 1976) provides some insight.

Schutz (1899-1959) was a student of Edmund Husserl. Schutz's life-work focussed on building the foundations of a self-sufficient system of sociological thought and procedures, grounded within the ideas of phenomenology (Schutz, 1970, ed. Wagner). Schutz was primarily interested in the ordinary - the day-to-day interactions between people and their social environments and how these interactions take place.

While Schutz's phenomenological theorising and corpus of work covers an extensive collection of ideas, it his concept of *multiple realities* that is apposite to our

argument. The idea of multiple realities evolved from the work of William James (1890/1950). In outlining his arguments for different 'realities', James noted 'the whole distinction of real and unreal, the whole psychology of belief, disbelief, and doubt, is thus grounded on two mental facts - first, that we are liable to think differently of the same; and second, that when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard' (1890/1950, p.290).

Schutz acknowledged the 'ingenious theory' of James and then, primarily as a means of detaching his own ideas from the psychological framework, used the term 'finite provinces of meaning' (Schutz, 1973). By this change of terminology he remained consistent with some of his earlier theorising which emphasised that it is the 'meaning of our experiences, and not the ontological structure of objects, which constitutes reality' (Schutz 1970, p.252).

For the purposes of this discussion, we will draw on two Schutzian realities: the paramount reality and the world of imaginings and fantasms. According to Schutz (1970) the paramount reality refers to the finite province of meaning which we call everyday life. Schutz argued that we remain in the 'natural attitude' of the paramount reality until we receive a specific 'shock' which compels us to shift the accent of reality to another one.

The 'shocks' discussed by Schutz are transition points between the paramount reality and other finite provinces of meaning. For example: when the curtain is raised at the beginning of a theatrical performance or film; we suspend reality while we attend to that new experience. Theoretically, the historic precinct represents a finite

province of meaning; a place of imagining (and fantasy). As visitors move from the paramount reality of the adjacent city into *The Rocks,* there are 'signs' which convey transition or 'shock' points; older buildings, a reorientation of scale; decreased traffic, and a slowing of pace. Once entered, visitors are suspended in this new reality by The Rocks experience – the experiences of intimacy and authenticity – a place set aside from the paramount reality.

The maintenance of the experience in this non-paramount world, rests on the extent to which the precinct itself sustains its non-paramount character during the visit. A clash of architectural form, a cacophony of external noise, or an 'out of character' social intrusion may challenge the experience being experienced – the phenomenon itself.

Visitor-type might also affect the extent to which an individual remains within the non-paramount reality. Arguably the 'depthlessness' of *The Browser's* visit in contrast to the 'depth' of *The Explorer* may manifest itself in a type of liminal experience; engaged by the experience of place but 'on the edge' of the paramount reality.

**CONCLUSION**

In this study we have attempted to gain insight into tourists' experiences of an historic precinct using a phenomenological approach. Our data suggest that intimacy, authenticity and the general notion of place are the essential characteristics (or essences) of their experience. Further we have engaged in some phenomenological theorising using the work of Alfred Schutz.

However, while the principal focus of this study was on understanding experience, it seems to us that our nascent theorising may also have some implications for the management of historic precincts. For example, how do the precinct managers maintain the sense of place essential to The Rocks experience? Part of the answer to this question is to ensure that inappropriate development does not compromise the experience of the different visitor types identified within the study – the explorers, browsers and samplers.

In our view, a strategy that we have termed 'layering experiences' could be embedded within planning practice, which would then guide the ongoing development and management of the precinct. Layering provides for different 'levels' of experience within the precinct, from the main thoroughfare to the back lanes. Such a strategy seeks to ensure that diversity of experience is privileged over homogeneity. In this sense it raises the possibility that an 'experience opportunity spectrum' could be defined and developed for urban tourism precincts, as a basic planning tool. This notion is similar in concept to the recreation opportunity spectrum developed for recreational planning purposes (Clarke & Stankey, 1979), which has also been modified for application in certain tourism contexts (see, for example, Butler & Waldbrook, 1991). The main difference is that the opportunity spectrum approach focuses on providing a range of settings for a variety of different experiences, whereas the notion of layering implies that the same setting must be capable of contemporaneously accommodating a range of experiences. There is nothing in this study to suggest that such layers cannot be provided concurrently and without compromising the experience of a visitor who only wishes to engage with a particular layer, but doing so successfully is contingent on an understanding of the essences of the experiences and how these relate to the controllable dimensions of the setting.

To date, our phenomenological and practical theorising has been focussed within the experiential boundaries of the historic precinct. The next step will be to more rigorously ground these ideas through investigations of the experiences of visitors within other precinct 'types', for example: the festival market place which is conceivably the experiential antithesis of the historic precinct; or an ethnic quarter which possibly resonates more with some of the experiences of The Rocks.

Our overall project therefore is to more completely explicate the phenomenon of precincts, to theorise their role in the overall urban tourist experience, and to develop planning and management implications arising from this work. While phenomenology will remain central to our approach we envision broader, more ecumenical disciplinary outcomes.

> *The world of my daily life is by no means my private world but is from the outset an intersubjective one, shared with my fellow men, experienced and interpreted by others: in brief, it is a world common to all of us.*
> *Alfred Schutz (1970)*

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**Table 1: Age of Participants**

| Age Band | Number | Participants %* |
|----------|--------|-----------------|
| 20-30yrs | 10 | 32 |
| 30-40yrs | 6 | 19 |
| 40-50yrs | 1 | 4 |
| 50-60yrs | 6 | 19 |
| 60-70yrs | 8 | 26 |
| Totals | 31 | 100 |

\*     All percentages rounded

**Table 2: Place of Origin of Participants**

| Place/Origin# | Number | Participants %* |
|---|---|---|
| USA/Canada | 12 | 38 |
| UK | 5 | 16 |
| Europe | 10 | 32 |
| Australia | 3 | 11 |
| Other | 1 | 3 |
| Totals | 31 | 100 |

\*      All percentages rounded

\#      Demographic data broadly accords with existing visitor profiles (SHFA, 2000)

**Table 3:**       **Major Themes and Categories**

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| THEMES | Categories |
|---|---|
| **ATMOSPHERE** | Living Place |
| | Safety/Security |
| | Contrast |
| **PHYSICAL PLACE** | Architecture |
| | Location |
| | Shopping |
| **HISTORY** | Preservation vs Development |
| | Interpretation and Meaning |

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