

The tourist experience of historic waterfront precincts

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades urban waterfronts worldwide have become places of significant change. Many have essentially lost their working port functions and have been redeveloped for other purposes, often incorporating significant leisure and tourism functions. Others, however, have maintained a significant portion of their original commercial maritime activities, but have still become a focus for leisure and tourism pursuits. This paper explores two such waterfront precincts in major Australian cities: Fremantle in Perth and Williamstown in Melbourne, places with long histories in shipping but very recent histories in tourism. The focus of the paper is on understanding how tourists experience these places, and what it is about such precincts that contribute most to their touristic appeal.

The basis for the research was a series of structured interviews with both domestic and international visitors to each precinct. Fifty-six individual interviews were conducted in Williamstown and thirty interviews involving forty-eight individuals were conducted in Fremantle. In both cases the interviews were conducted over a two-day period.

The results shed light on why and how such places appeal to tourists and also provide guidance on how to maintain their appeal. Relaxation and taking time out from the everyday city were important visitor motivations, and the waterfront setting contributed to these. Fremantle, however, provided more depth to the tourists' experiences because it offered greater opportunities to engage actively with the setting and others who occupied it, rather than simply experiencing it in a passive way as appeared to be the case in Williamstown. Significantly there was a strong feeling that the working port element was an important part of Fremantle's appeal, along with a very strong connection to history through a well-conserved physical fabric. The lack of depth in the Williamstown experience seemed to limit the visitors' ability to appreciate the precinct's history, with its most positive features relating to the pure physicality of its waterfront setting.

More generally, the results provide some key insights into the functions that tourism precincts perform within the overall urban tourism experience and how significant precincts are to such experiences. They reinforce earlier findings of the previous studies conducted by the researchers that intimacy, authenticity and a strong sense of place are vital elements of the tourist experience in urban precincts, and precincts are at the core of the urban tourism experience.

Keywords: tourism precincts, urban tourism, heritage, tourist experience, place

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a significant feature of the economy, life and geographic structure of many cities around the world. One manifestation of this is that tourism has played a major role in the transformation and revitalisation of districts within cities that have traditionally accommodated commercial maritime activities. In some cases these activities have become redundant and the areas have been substantially redeveloped, with little of the original fabric remaining. In other cases, however, significant parts of the maritime activities and the historic fabric have been maintained, and tourism has not only been developed within this fabric but is often dependent upon it. Thus historic waterfront areas have emerged as a distinctive type of tourism precinct that may exist in cities that still possess working harbours.

This paper examines two such historic waterfront precincts in Australian cities: Williamstown in Melbourne, the capital city of the state of Victoria, and Fremantle in Perth, the capital of Western Australia. The focus of the research was to examine the visitor experiences in these precincts, with a view to developing a better understanding of how such precincts are experienced, the key features of the precincts that contribute to quality experiences, and the general functions of precincts within the context of the overall urban tourism experience. This study represents the fourth stage in an ongoing study of urban tourism precincts, which was funded by the Sustainable Tourism Co-operative Research Centre.

The study precincts

Williamstown

Located near the mouth of the Yarra River, Williamstown was one of the first sites of European settlement around Port Phillip Bay in the area that was to become Melbourne. Established in 1835, it was Melbourne's original port, although it has long since ceased to be so (Faculty of Arts, Monash University, 2005). It does, however, maintain some working port elements by virtue of a substantial marina, dry dock and naval dockyards.

Williamstown is connected to the CBD by road (15 minutes), rail (30 minutes) and ferry (50 minutes). The opening of the West Gate Bridge in 1978 considerably improved access to the city centre and encouraged gentrification (Faculty of Arts, Monash University, 2005). As the area's homes were renovated the retail fabric experienced a similar change, with the emergence of a café strip along the historic Nelson Place in the 1990s, which now forms the core of the tourism precinct. It adjoins an expansive waterfront park, which provides opportunities for promenading and also hosts a market periodically. The main feature of the waterfront is Gem Pier, where the HMAS Castlemaine Ship Museum is moored and ferries arrive from the city centre. Nelson Place also features tourist-oriented retailing such as antiques and curios, bookshops and confectionary stores and is physically separate from the 'normal' retailing area of Williamstown.

Elsewhere, Williamstown remains largely residential, although some isolated tourist attractions are scattered throughout, such as the Scienceworks Museum (2 kilometres north of Nelson Place), Williamstown Beach (1 kilometre west) and the Timeball Tower (500 metres south-east). Overall the suburb has retained much of its historic built fabric, both in the residential backstreets and along the Nelson Place strip.

Fremantle

Fremantle is a suburb of Perth located at the mouth of the Swan River, approximately twenty-five kilometres and thirty minutes travelling time from the CBD by road or rail. A ferry service, popular with tourists, also connects it to the city centre. The settlement of Fremantle dates back to 1829, when it was established as the port for the fledgling Swan River Colony, later to become the city of Perth (City of Fremantle Council, 2005). It remains the major port for both the city and the state of Western Australia. It is also a major fishing port of long standing, an activity which contributed to significant influxes of Italian, Greek and Portuguese immigrants (Hall and Sellwood, 1995). It is thus an area with a rich history and diverse cultural mix where tourism has been superimposed on, but not replaced, the commercial maritime fabric.

The tourist precinct of Fremantle is located at the western end of the township, effectively comprising the town centre and immediately adjacent river- and seafront areas. It juxtaposes the working port elements of the shipping terminals and the fishing boat harbour, the latter of which has become a significant focus for tourism developments. Fremantle came to prominence as a tourist venue as a result of its hosting the 1987 America's Cup defence, which acted as a catalyst for major public and private investment in both new developments and in the restoration of the historic built

fabric (Hall and Sellwood, 1995). It has been described as 'one of the finest surviving examples of Victorian townscape in Australia' (Hall and Sellwood, 1995: 108). As well as the general ambient attractions of historic streetscape and waterfront, there are numerous specific attractions within the precinct including significant historic sites, such as the Round House and Fremantle Prison, museums, most notably the Western Australian Maritime Museum and Shipwreck Galleries, markets and an arts centre. Restaurants and cafes are concentrated in an area known as the 'Cappuccino Strip' in the town centre and around the fishing boat harbour (Countrywide Publications, 2005). The precinct is fairly compact, with all attractions within easy walking distance of one another.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this study an urban tourism precinct is defined as:

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 (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005: 517).

Precincts have been variously described by other authors as tourist 'districts' (e.g. Getz, 1993a), 'quarters' (e.g. Montgomery, 2003) or 'areas' (e.g. Maitland and Newman, 2004). Effectively such terms describe the same basic phenomenon.

Research on urban tourism precincts to date has been fairly limited and narrow in scope, with a particular emphasis on geographic or planning perspectives (Stansfield and Rickert, 1970; Wall and Sinnott, 1980; Ashworth and de Haan, 1985; Law, 1985; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Meyer-Arendt, 1990; Burtenshaw, Bateman and Ashworth, 1991; Getz, 1993a, 1993b; Getz, Joncas and Kelly, 1994; Pearce, 1998). Some studies have embraced a sociological perspective (Mullins, 1991; Conforti, 1996; Chang, Milne, Fallon and Pohlmann, 1996), while others have developed ideas around the economic development or urban regeneration roles of precincts (Judd, 1995; Stabler, 1998; Montgomery, 2004).

Other studies have focussed on particular types of urban tourism precincts but have tended to either describe them or focus on their development process., e.g. Rowe and Stevenson (1994) examined the 'festival marketplace', a form of precinct that has often occupied redundant commercial waterfront land that has been purpose redeveloped for tourism. In contrast, Maitland and Newman (2004) have examined precincts which emerge without possessing large attractions or a distinct heritage and have not been planned with tourism in mind. As well as looking at the supply-side factors that stimulate tourist visitation, such as social change and amenity improvements, this study also considered the visitor's perspective and discovered that the attraction is based on distinctive qualities of place. The precincts examined in the current study, especially Williamstown, share some of these characteristics in that the emergence of tourism has

been incidental to the gentrification of the surrounding suburbs rather than being planned and deliberate.

Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) provided an extensive analysis of the tourist-historic city, however the authors acknowledge that their analysis is one which is essentially descriptive and focuses on the whole city and the way tourism and heritage are structured into it rather than being an examination of historic tourism precincts. In relation to waterfront redevelopments for tourism Wilkinson (1988) discussed problems associated with such redevelopments, while Fagence and Craig-Smith (1995) have provided an eclectic international set of case studies where such redevelopments have occurred, with a focus on describing planning processes and associated issues. Waitt (2000) explored the very specific issue of how tourists perceive authenticity in the historic waterfront precinct of The Rocks in Sydney; broader aspects of the tourist experience were not considered.

Viewed overall, the research on urban tourism precincts has been predominantly descriptive and focused on: their physical and functional forms; their economic significance; their role as a catalyst for urban renewal; and descriptions of their evolution and associated planning and development processes. The specific research on historic and /or waterfront precincts has predominantly mirrored these foci. This paper attempts to further develop the field of enquiry by shedding light on the nature of the visitor experience in the specific context of the historic urban waterfront precinct, but with implications for the broader understanding of urban tourism precincts in general.

METHODOLOGY

In previous precinct studies conducted by the authors (Griffin and Hayllar, 2004; Hayllar and Griffin, 2005; Griffin, Hayllar and King, 2006) a qualitative approach has been employed. Visitors have been interviewed at length in a fairly unstructured way. The interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently subjected to content analysis, with the earlier studies employing a phenomenological approach to that analysis. The approach employed in the current study represents a progression in a methodology that is gradually being developed for the examination of urban tourism precincts. It was also, to some extent, dictated by logistical considerations, in that neither of the subject precincts possessed an appropriate venue for conducting lengthy, tape-recorded interviews. Hence a more structured approach was taken to the interview process, although the data analysis remained largely qualitative.

In both precincts, visitors were intercepted at places where the researchers had previously observed high levels of tourist activity. points that most visitors were likely to pass through at some stage in their visit. At these points, people were approached, asked whether they were visitors to Melbourne or Perth respectively, informed about the nature of the research and then interviewed about their visit. The interview was structured into a series of questions dealing with such matters as:

- Previous experience and knowledge of the precinct;
- Reasons for their visit;
- Activities;
- Whether they viewed the precinct as a place for locals or tourists;

- Overall impressions of the precinct;
- How they would describe the atmosphere;
- How they would describe the physical character;
- Best and worst features; and
- The significance of their visit to the precinct as part of their overall experience in the city.

Some general personal details about the interviewee were also gathered, such as age and place of origin. With the exception of simple questions such as age or whether the interviewee had visited the precinct/city previously, all questions were open-ended. Answers were written on the question sheet by the interviewer. The precise questions used differed slightly between the precincts. The interviews were completed first in Williamstown and, based on this experience, the researchers felt that it was appropriate to slightly modify a small number of questions and to add some questions to explore one issue in a little more depth.

In both precincts, the interviews were conducted over a two-day period in the Spring of 2004. A total of fifty-six interviews were completed over a weekend in Williamstown, and thirty interviews involving forty-eight individuals were completed over two week days in Fremantle¹. Each interview lasted for 15-20 minutes. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the age and place of origin of interviewees in both precincts. Precise visitation data were not available for either precinct, so it was not possible to determine how representative our samples were of the general visitation patterns, however a reasonable cross-section of ages and places of origin was obtained.

The responses to the open-ended questions were coded for analysis and frequency tables were compiled. However, given the small numbers of respondents, these tallies were purely intended to indicate the major themes emerging in relation to each question rather than to give a statistically reliable measure of the significance of each theme. The analysis, thus, was predominantly qualitative, with the major themes being highlighted in the following sections.

Table 1: Age of interviewees in Williamstown and Fremantle

Age	Williamstown (n=56)	Fremantle (n=48)
<20	3	3
20-29	8	10
30-39	4	11
40-49	11	13
50-59	11	9
60+	10	1
not specified	9*	

* In Williamstown there were a small number of cases where the interviewer did not record the interviewee's age bracket.

¹ The interviews were conducted over a weekend in Williamstown as weekday visitation was generally fairly low in this precinct. Fremantle generally experiences fairly high levels of visitation across the full week.

Table 2: Place of origin of interviewees in Williamstown and Fremantle

Place of Origin	Williamstown (n=56)	Fremantle (n=48)
Domestic (state/territory):		
Victoria	18	6
New South Wales	5	9
South Australia	4	4
Tasmania	4	3
Queensland	3	3
Western Australia	2	3
Northern Territory	1	-
Total domestic	37	28
International (country/region):		
New Zealand	5	2
UK/Ireland	5	9
Other Europe	6	2
Asia	2	1
USA	-	6
Africa	1	-
Total international	19	20

RESULTS

Prior knowledge

One factor that may have influenced what visitors sought or expected to experience in each of these precincts was their level of prior knowledge. Thus there were a number of questions relating to how visitors had heard about the precinct, whether they had visited it before, and whether they had visited Melbourne or Perth before.

Generally visitors to Williamstown had a higher level of prior experience than was the case with Fremantle. Over 60% had visited Williamstown before and nearly 90% had visited Melbourne previously. Some visitors were in fact making day visits from nearby parts of rural Victoria. First-time visitors were most often acting on the recommendations of friends and relatives, with smaller numbers being informed via industrial sources such as brochures, the ferry company or accommodation establishments.

In contrast, only one-third of visitors to Fremantle were on a repeat visit, and half were on their first trip to Perth. Compared to Williamstown, Fremantle was a more well-known destination, with many visitors indicating that they had heard about it through organic sources such as the media and school, much of it related to the America's Cup defence. A number of people could not specify the precise source of their information but merely indicated that it was famous or they 'just knew'. A relatively small number had heard about Fremantle through friends and relatives, while the major industrial source of information was tourist guidebooks. A few visitors indicated that they had come to

Fremantle for a primary purpose other than leisure, such as to attend a conference or as part of a navy visit.

Reasons for visit

Visitors were asked to indicate why they had come to each precinct on that particular day. The predominant reason given for a visit to Williamstown was simply to wander around or have a day out. Other common responses were of a similarly general nature, such as to relax, to satisfy their curiosity and to socialise with family and friends. A smaller number sought to enjoy the general feel of the waterfront setting. Overall there was a sense that the precinct's general ambience was its most appealing attraction, rather than the visitor being drawn by specific sites or features. The most significant single feature mentioned was shopping, particularly the markets which were being held on one of the interviewing days. A relatively small number of visitors were drawn by the historical attractions, with a similar number citing the beaches as a reason for their visit. For some, Williamstown as the endpoint, was less significant than the means of getting there, the ferry ride from the Melbourne CBD.

The predominant reasons given by Fremantle visitors were to have a general wander around, to have a look and satisfy their curiosity, or to simply experience the atmosphere. Some mentioned the history of the place in particular, something which they felt could not be experienced elsewhere in Perth. Very few indicated that they came to visit a specific attraction, such as Fremantle Prison or the Maritime Museum, in spite of the fact that Fremantle possesses far more major attractions than Williamstown. Similarly to Williamstown, the ferry ride from Perth CBD formed part of the reason to visit Fremantle for some.

Activities

Visitors were asked to indicate the activities they had engaged in during their visit to each precinct. A limitation of the study was that, to maximise the number of overall responses, some interviews were completed in morning periods, not long after visits had commenced. Hence some of the responses reflected intentions as well as completed activities.

The main activities of Williamstown visitors were eating or drinking in the cafes and restaurants and going to the shops and markets, each reported by nearly two thirds of interviewees. The fact that the markets were being held on one of the interviewing days suggests that the latter activity was slightly atypical of a 'normal' day, given that the markets are held only once a month. Close to half of the visitors indicated they had simply been walking or wandering around, while around one in five had been engaged in the more purposeful activity of sightseeing. There were no other specific activities that were reported by more than a handful of visitors, and this suggests that the range of pursuits for the visitor to this precinct is fairly limited.

A much broader range of activities was reported in Fremantle, although there were some similarities with Williamstown. The most frequently reported activities were going to restaurant and cafes, and simply wandering around. For some, the latter activity involved a sense of exploration, with visitors mentioning the notions of 'getting lost', 'getting one's bearings', and having no plans but rather seeing what they would encounter. In

Williamstown there was a sense that people wandered around because it was a relaxing setting in which to do so, but in Fremantle there was a belief that the wandering would lead to discoveries that engaged the visitor, and hence was more purposeful. The greater sense of purpose was also evident in Fremantle visitors mentioning more specific attractions, such as museums, galleries and historic sites; more than two thirds indicated that they had visited or intended to visit such attractions.

A place for locals or tourists

Previous research had indicated that tourists have a general desire to see elements of 'real life' in tourism precincts (Griffin and Hayllar, 2004; Hayllar and Griffin, 2005, Griffin et al., 2006), although there is a certain ambivalence in this attitude. Tourists wish to have encounters with local people, or at least have opportunities to observe them at play and thus learn something about their characters and ways of life. The presence of locals in a precinct is thus a positive feature, provided the locals are in a similar relaxed state of mind to the tourists. Hence, in this current study visitors were asked to give their opinion on whether the precinct they were visiting was predominantly a place for locals or tourists. They were also asked to explain their answers.

Williamstown was generally perceived as providing a reasonable balance for both locals and tourists, although there was a slight weight of opinion that it was more for the latter. The facilities and activities available, particularly restaurants and cafes, were viewed as catering for both locals and tourists. The minority who saw it as more a place for locals, however, commented that there was 'not a lot to do', that the facilities seemed primarily geared to locals, or that there was not an obvious dominant presence of tourists.

In Fremantle, only one visitor regarded it as more a place for locals, because there was 'not enough to do'. However, a majority viewed it as providing a good balance because of the mix of activities and the obvious presence of children, who were assumed to be locals. The restaurants and cafes were seen as catering predominantly to locals, including people from other parts of Perth, while the historical attractions were primarily for tourists. This balance was viewed quite positively as it provided opportunities to 'get to know the people' and being 'too touristy' could somehow destroy the authentic feel. The presence of the working port was seen as an important element of this authentic feel by some. The minority who regarded it as more a place for tourists felt that this was because of the interesting historic physical character, implying that such conservation is a function of tourist activity, and the numerous attractions and activities which were geared to tourists. There was not really a negative connotation placed on its being predominantly for tourists.

Overall impression

Visitors were asked to give their overall impression of each precinct, whether this was favourable or unfavourable, and to explain their answer. The words used to define their impression were regarded as particularly significant as these indicated the predominant characteristics of the respective precincts and the experiences they offered. They also give an impression of the experiences that visitors were seeking.

A strong majority of visitors had a positive overall impression of Williamstown, perhaps not surprising given the high proportion of repeat visitors interviewed. The most common

impression was that it was a 'relaxed' place, with a good atmosphere or feeling. The friendly people and the opportunity to see others 'enjoying life' were also oft-cited characteristics. Words such as 'peaceful', 'quiet', 'clean' and 'nice' were frequently used to describe the place. However, rarely were superlatives such as 'great' and 'fantastic' used, and some visitors indicated that, while their experience was positive, they would not necessarily return because there was 'not a lot to do'. Significantly, a number of visitors mentioned that it represented a good contrast to the city and provided a temporary escape or refuge from the fast pace of everyday urban life; it was compared to a 'country town' and some expressed the hope that it not become too developed and that the quaint, historic character be maintained. Perhaps reflecting the range of preferences that visitors might have with respect to precincts, the few negative impressions included the feeling that the place 'has not developed enough'. Overall, Williamstown emerged as a pleasant place 'to be' rather than 'to do', a temporary, relaxing diversion from the busy city, but one that is not strongly emotionally engaging, which led to it being unsatisfying for some.

The overall impression of Fremantle was similarly very positive but, in contrast to Williamstown, it evoked a much broader range of reasons given for these positive feelings. It too was regarded as 'relaxed', 'quiet', 'clean' and 'friendly', but it was also viewed as possessing the slightly deeper quality of 'warmth', suggesting that it was more emotionally engaging. A significant number of visitors made mention of some of its key physical characteristics – old buildings, history and maritime activities, with the 'working port' element of the latter adding to its authentic feel. Some described it as 'interesting' and its compact size was also viewed favourably. Only two visitors had formed any sort of negative impression about the place, regarding it as a little 'dull'. Generally the greater diversity and depth of impressions conveyed about Fremantle suggest that it possesses a greater range of experiences for tourists, something we have described as 'layers' in our previous work (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005). In comparison, Williamstown starts to emerge as somewhat one-dimensional.

Atmosphere

Visitors were asked how they would describe the atmosphere of each precinct to someone who had not been there. This question was intended to elicit those characteristics of the precinct's atmosphere that had the greatest impact on the visitors. The notion of atmosphere is concerned with the overall 'feel' of the precinct. We have previously argued (Griffin et al., 2006) that the more a visitor is engaged by the atmosphere (its existential 'feel') the greater the depth of the experience and perhaps attachment to the precinct and overall urban destination. The atmosphere is created by the interaction of the social and personal experiences of the visitor in a dialectical relationship with themselves, others and the precinct space.

By far the most predominant view of Williamstown's atmosphere was that it was 'relaxed' or 'laid back'. 'Friendly' was another common description. Along similar lines, a few visitors described it as 'peaceful', while others emphasised the 'nautical' atmosphere afforded by the bayside location. The contrast with the city of Melbourne was noted by a few, with some describing Williamstown as having a 'village atmosphere'. A fairly small number of visitors had an alternative view, describing its atmosphere as 'alive', 'active', 'cosmopolitan', 'touristy' and 'trendy'. Very few saw the historic character of the place as the predominant feature of its atmosphere.

A 'relaxed/laid back' atmosphere was also the most common view of Fremantle. For some this was associated with its 'ocean feel'. It was also viewed as 'warm', 'friendly' or 'comfortable' by a significant number of visitors. The historical character of the place seemed to be more engaging than was the case with Williamstown, as quite a few visitors made mention of the 'small town' feel and 'historical identity' providing a feeling of 'stepping back in time'. While 'relaxed' and 'laid back' were the predominant feelings, a relatively higher proportion of visitors saw it as 'cosmopolitan', 'alternate' or 'interesting and alive'. Generally, Fremantle seemed to elicit a slightly wider range of feelings about its atmosphere, suggesting that it offered a more complex set of experiences.

Physical character

Visitors were asked how they would describe the physical character of each precinct to someone who had not been there. The intention of this question was to identify those physical features that made the greatest impression and were thus likely to be most memorable.

The most powerful element of Williamstown's physical character was the waterfront, which featured in the descriptions of more than half of the visitors. This far outweighed the only other features mentioned by more than a handful – 'historic' and the shopping/café strip. These findings suggest that it is the waterfront setting that makes the place distinctive, and perhaps memorable. Another strong, related feature of physical character for some was the views afforded by the location, across the bay to the Melbourne CBD. More generic descriptions of the precinct included that it was 'charming' or 'pretty', and a few saw it as a pleasant contrast with the city environment.

The historic character of the buildings dominated descriptions by Fremantle visitors, often supplemented by terms such as 'quaint' and 'well preserved'. Clearly the built environment had a far more powerful impact on visitors here than in Williamstown, with many commenting on the quality of the restoration and indicating the importance of maintaining the historic built fabric. The only other feature mentioned by more than one or two visitors was the working harbour, which was generally viewed as a very positive physical feature.

Best and worst features

Visitors were asked to indicate what they considered to be each precinct's best and worst features. This was an opportunity for them to provide a personal evaluation of their experiences, and to identify what had most contributed to, or detracted from, those experiences. More generally, this question allowed us to identify some of the characteristics of tourism precincts that influence the quality of experience.

There was a fairly wide range of opinions on what constituted Williamstown's best features, but one feature stood out – the waterfront, including the boats in the harbour, was mentioned by nearly half of all visitors. The next most common response was the view of Melbourne, although this was cited by less than one in five. Smaller numbers again cited such features as the atmosphere, cafes, parks, heritage, shops and markets, the lack of commercial development and the fact that it was close to Melbourne but different to it, more relaxed. The waterfront and harbour as a backdrop clearly emerged

as the most positive feature, establishing the setting for the other activities, which arguably would not have been as pleasant and enjoyable in another physical setting. This setting could be viewed as contributing to the relaxed feel which was so dominant in visitors' views of the atmosphere and their overall impressions of the precinct. In terms of worst features, few visitors even suggested one, and when they did it primarily related to basic supporting facilities rather than the inherent features of the place. Car parking was the only significant feature that received many adverse comments. There were also a few negative comments about the train station, access roads, public toilets and pollution or litter. A small number objected to some rather ugly apartment developments or commented on the 'lack of things to do'.

The views on Fremantle's best features were similarly diverse in scope, but without a dominant single feature and far less emphasis on the physical setting. The most powerful physical elements were the historic buildings, the seaside and working port. However, in this case visitors made mention of how these features contributed to the feeling and sense of the place. The historic buildings gave it a 'cosy feel' and allowed the visitor to 'see the history'. The working port made the place 'real', and provided a 'basis for the character that they can build on for tourists'. The restaurants and cafes, another strong positive feature, were not just places to eat and drink but provided 'vitality' and 'diversity'. Some visitors described the best features in fairly general terms – 'relaxed', 'quiet', 'friendly people', 'a relief, visually', 'a good place to wander' and 'easy to get around'. The sense emerges that Fremantle is a place that is more richly textured and diversely engaging than Williamstown and offers the visitor more than simply relaxation by the waterfront. Very few Fremantle visitors proffered a worst feature, with no single feature being mentioned by more than one person.

Significance of precincts to overall city experience

Visitors were asked to indicate how important their visit to places like Williamstown or Fremantle was to their overall enjoyment of Melbourne or Perth respectively. While previous questions focused on the direct precinct experience, this question sought to put that experience into the broader context of the visit to the city as a whole. As with most previous questions, visitors were asked to explain their answers. A number of supplementary questions were asked in the case of Fremantle, to further explore the importance of the precinct to the city's appeal.

To provide an overview of the visitors' views on this question, responses were analysed and scaled according to whether they regarded their visit as 'very important', 'somewhat important', or 'not/not very important'. The results for both precincts are presented in Table 3. In both cases fairly high proportions of visitors indicated that their visits were of considerable importance to their city experiences, particularly in the case of Fremantle.

Table 3: Importance of precinct visit as part of overall city experience

Degree of Importance	Williamstown (% of visitors)	Fremantle (% of visitors)
Very important	45	63
Somewhat important	29	23
Not/not very important	25	3
Can't say/no answer	2	10
Total	100	100

Just under half of those visiting Williamstown regarded their precinct visit as a very important part of their experience in Melbourne. The main reason given was that it represented a contrast to the city centre and an opportunity to take time out; Williamstown was seen as more relaxed, friendlier, quieter and less busy. It was variously described as a place that 'made Melbourne more welcoming', somewhere to 'put your feet on the ground' and as one of Melbourne's 'hidden jewels'. Both the small scale historic character and waterfront location were noted by some visitors as qualities that gave it its essentially different feel to other places in the city. It was a bonus that it was relatively close to the city centre. Those who ascribed a lesser degree of importance to their visit generally viewed it either as just a pleasant place for a day out or one of many things to do in Melbourne.

Fremantle seemed to engender similar but stronger feelings in this regard. Nearly two-thirds of those interviewed saw it as a very important part of their overall experience in Perth, while very few regarded it as unimportant. As with Williamstown, the contrast with the city centre was the most common reason given for the precinct visit being important, although this was not just about the opportunity to relax or take time out. Many visitors expressed the sentiment that a city centre is nothing special – 'a city is a city' – whereas the more intimate scale and feel of Fremantle, its 'village' or 'town' atmosphere, gave visitors a greater sense of connection to the place (Perth) and its people. Others simply felt that there was little else to do in Perth which was otherwise largely a staging post for visits to other parts of Western Australia. When asked whether they would have come to Perth if it did not have places like Fremantle one-fifth of those interviewed responded in the negative. Many of those who responded in the affirmative to this question qualified their opinion by suggesting that the remainder of Perth had a somewhat limited appeal. They were positive but not enthusiastic about the rest of the city and viewed Fremantle as giving more depth to their experience. The vast majority (90%) opined that Fremantle was more a separate place than a part of Perth by virtue of its different character, atmosphere, and even people. Fremantle was more 'laid back', 'friendly', a place to wander and meet people. Perth was a city whereas Fremantle was a town; 'cities are cities' but Fremantle was unique. Fremantle also possessed a 'sense of history' that was otherwise lacking in the city, and this in turn gave a greater sense of connection to the place. It was acknowledged as 'touristy' and a 'holiday place' but, rather than being a negative attribute, this added to its friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

DISCUSSION

The two precincts studied possess similar basic characteristics, historic urban waterfronts, but differ in scale. The results also suggest that they differ in the range and depth of experiences offered. Fremantle emerged as a place which offers the visitor both breadth and depth of experience. Williamstown, while satisfying and pleasant for most, offered experiences of a more limited scope, arguably because of its smaller scale, less complex physical form and narrower range of activities. There were, however, some important similarities between the two precincts in terms of the qualities that most appealed to visitors and the sorts of experiences that were being sought. Such similarities and differences provide a basis for developing a general theoretical understanding of urban tourism precincts and their users, the qualities that make

precincts work from the visitor's perspective and the functions they perform within the overall urban tourism experience. The following section discusses such implications.

The first set of theoretical considerations concerns the experiences provided by the study precincts for the visitor types identified in a previous study by the authors as *Explorers*, *Browsers* and *Samplers* (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005). This typology of visitors reflects the notion that different people can simultaneously experience a precinct in quite different ways, provided the precinct offers opportunities for different 'layers' of experience. The Explorers are those visitors who want to move beyond the façade of a precinct, to find their own way and discover its inner complexities and qualities. The Browsers are more content to stay within the confines of the main precinct area and to follow the tourist routes. The Samplers visit precincts as just another stop on their schedule of moving through a city's attractions, and are often concerned purely with visiting a specific attraction rather than experiencing the precinct for its own sake. The Sampler may also use the precinct as a place of brief respite or refuge but will not move beyond the fringe or specified 'refuge point', a café for example. The results of the current study provide further validation for this typology, as elements of all three types were found, to varying degrees, in both precincts. Fremantle offered the most complete set of layers of experience. For the Sampler it offered a good range of specific attractions as well as an immediate sense of difference from the remainder of the city that could be almost instantaneously experienced upon arrival. For the Browser it offered well-defined, visually stimulating tourist routes along the waterfront and the vibrant Cappuccino Strip. For the Explorer it provided opportunities for wandering aimlessly, 'getting lost' in the backstreets and discovering something about the history and current life of the place. In contrast, Williamstown offered most to the Browser, who could follow the very well-defined tourist circuit comprising the shops and cafes of Nelson Place, the waterfront promenade and Gem Pier. The Sampler's experiences were limited somewhat by the narrow range of activities and specific attractions, which contributed to a degree of dissatisfaction by some visitors. There was an element of Sampling, however, evident in the fact that many of the visitors were in the precinct seeking refuge or brief respite from the city centre, which was facilitated and complemented by the ferry ride as an appealing activity in its own right. For the Explorer, Williamstown appears at first glance to offer little; very few visitors ventured beyond the main tourist circuit and there was little to entice them to do so. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the visit to the precinct itself was an act of Exploration, an attempt to get a stronger connection to the city of Melbourne and its people, which the city centre does not provide, to discover the secrets of its backstreets and 'hidden jewels'. Fremantle also seemed to be serving the needs of Explorers in a similar fashion by offering a greater sense of connection to Perth's history and people.

The second set of theoretical considerations concerns the essence of the visitor experience in tourism precincts. In previous studies (Hayllar, Griffin and Huyskens, 2003; Griffin and Hayllar, 2004; Hayllar and Griffin, 2005) the authors have employed a phenomenological approach to both the collection and analysis of data. The ultimate purpose of such an approach is to identify the essence(s) of the phenomenon being examined. An essence is a 'construct' that arises from the interaction with the structural components of an experience – actions, interactions and elements of the physical and social environment. Thus developing essences is a reconstructive or constructive act on the part of the researcher (Denzin, 1989) which seeks to answer the question: what is being experienced? The move to essence involves differentiating between the 'particular

essence', or underpinning experiences, and the 'general essence', which is a cumulative construct of the particular (Spiegelberg, 1982). In a study of The Rocks precinct in Sydney, two particular essences were identified, *intimacy* and *authenticity*, along with the general essence of *place* (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005). *Intimacy* is concerned with how the more 'human scale' of a precinct provides a situational and social counterpoint to the city. Clearly this is an essence which resonates with the experiences of visitors in both Fremantle and Williamstown. The notions of escape from the fast-paced, impersonal city and the village or town feel were powerful themes associated with the experiences of both precincts. *Authenticity* is a problematic construct within the tourism literature, however in the current context it is concerned with difference, that is, how a city such as Perth or Melbourne sets itself apart from other modern cities. Here, the findings for Fremantle and Williamstown are somewhat contrasting. In both cases the visitors were motivated by a search for difference, which was not to be found in the respective city centres. In Fremantle the sense of difference was quite profound, to the extent that it was perceived to be a separate place rather than revealing the real identity of Perth. Its small town feel and sense of history contributed to this. Moreover it was acknowledged as a 'touristy' place but not an artificial one; real Perth people could be observed at play there, and the working port was a reassuringly authentic element, powerfully so. One senses that in Williamstown the desired feelings of connection with the real Melbourne did not emerge because it did not offer insights into life behind the immediate façade of the tourist circuit. Surprisingly for such an historic place, it did not appear to strongly imbue the visitor with a sense of that history beyond an appreciation of its quaintness. The cumulative structure of the particular essences leads to the general essence (Spiegelberg, 1982) of *place*. Fremantle emerged as possessing a strong and distinctive sense of place, where the experiences it offered were unique, even in the context of the broader city in which it was located, and prospectively memorable. Williamstown on the other hand was pleasant place to be, and to return to, but not especially distinctive, memorable or deeply engaging. It was a pleasurable diversion in a city which offered many such experiences. Its physical setting and scale contributed most to this quality. This is not to say that Williamstown was a less satisfactory precinct than Fremantle, but rather that the essential experience it offered was fundamentally different, in spite of the superficial characteristics that the two precincts shared.

All of this leads to a partial identification of the functions that precincts may perform in relation to the overall urban tourist experience. Clearly the precincts do perform some different functions, but just as clearly those differing functions may be of similar value in terms of contributing to the experience base of a tourist city. Amongst the possible functions that emerge from this study are that precincts:

- provide respite or refuge from the everyday life of the city being visited;
- put the tourist into a state of mind that reflects their desires as a tourist (at leisure) within a setting (the city) that is not normally associated with being a tourist;
- enable the visitor to connect with the people of the city in a setting where the needs and mind-states of both tourists and residents are compatible;
- enable the tourist to develop a better understanding of the city, its people and its history;
- enable the tourist to experience a more distinctive sense of place than is afforded by an internationalised city centre;
- provide an environment where the tourist has more freedom to wander and explore;
- and

- represent attractions in their own right and thereby supplement the tourist activity base of the city.

Not all precincts may perform all of these functions, but this research suggests that it is important that a precinct perform at least some of them. Examining additional precincts with different characteristics and settings to Fremantle and Williamstown may subsequently reveal additional functions.

CONCLUSION

Precincts clearly play a number of important roles within the context of the overall experience of the tourist within a city. The contrasting experiences of Fremantle and Williamstown further demonstrate that historic waterfronts have the capacity, by virtue of their physical settings, intimate scale, connections to the past and other inherent characteristics, to effectively perform a number of those functions. Further research is needed in a broader range of precincts, however, to more precisely and comprehensively identify these functions and the precinct qualities that underlie them. Developing such an understanding may contribute substantially to the process of developing and managing sustainably appealing urban tourist destinations.

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