NORTH TERRACE PROJECT: REVITALISING A CULTURAL TOURISM PRECINCT

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Introduction
Since the emergence and popularising of ‘Main Street Programs’, various interests around the world have absorbed their logic, commercial sense and heritage value and tried a version for themselves. However, the actual initiation and development of Main Street regeneration is not always as simple as some of the literature might suggest and requires individual adaptation to differing circumstances.

The following is a case study of progress so far on an Adelaide example. It is very much a lay users’ approach and no pretence at expertise in this area is claimed.

Project background
The project was initiated by a committee which evolved after the 1989 South Australian Tourism Week, ‘Cultural Tourism Workshop’. Tourism South Australia (The State Government Tourism Department) was asked to invite interested parties such as the Arts Department, State Heritage Branch of the Department of Environment and Planning, History Trust of South Australia, National Trust of South Australia, TAFE School of Tourism and two regional tourism bodies to form a Cultural Tourism Committee, because of the enthusiasm expressed at the workshop. Tourism market research and locally expressed community attitudes had converged to support the notion that different and authentic cultural environments are significant interests for locals and visitors when travelling (Banks 1989).

The committee first met in July 1989 and without budget or staff, set about raising the profile of cultural tourism and facilitating cultural tourism projects. It was by necessity very focused and limited in its approach to achieving these aims. Realistic projects which could become success models were needed to gain a profile, credibility and funding for cultural tourism and the committee. One project opportunity, which was not new but had not been fully realised in the past, was the concept of revitalising one of Adelaide’s most interesting and visited streets – North Terrace. Recent efforts had only considered revitalisation through marketing and promotion. The need for a broader Main Street-style approach seemed obvious.

The committee gained valuable insights from the leading work undertaken by the Victorian Tourism Commission and the subsequent Cultural Tourism Association of Victoria in the mid to late 1980s.

Tourism South Australia with the Department for the Arts and the Corporation of the City of Adelaide is playing a key role in the North Terrace Project of the committee (main initiating funding and executive support) because it considers that North Terrace has the potential to become Adelaide’s premier attraction for locals and visitors.

Scope of the project
North Terrace is a major boulevard extending east to west right through the centre of the City of Adelaide. It contains a diversity of cultural, retail, business, entertainment and leisure experiences with varied streetscapes and visual images, ranging from lush botanical, monumental and institutional to standard urban-commercial frontages. Its central section alone contains most of the State’s major cultural institutions (Art Gallery of South Australia, Australian Museum, Migration Museum, Old Parliament House, State Library), a casino, five star hotels, restaurants, night clubs, central railway station and other commercial and retail businesses. North Terrace also has direct but not necessarily obvious links with other significant and interesting city locations such as the River Torrens, Festival Centre, Zoological Gardens, City of Adelaide Park Lands, Rundle Mall retail area and Hindley Street night life.

Therefore, North Terrace is far from the archetypal, commercially depressed, unpeopled streetscape ripe for a business led Main Street-style regeneration. As part of its length already has a cultural precinct status and some charming landscapes, approximately 450000 international and interstate visitors were attracted to it in 1988-89. South Australian visitation is also strong and locals value it. Nevertheless, while North Terrace is already quite a remarkable street, overall, it is not the cohesive, vibrant, ‘people-friendly’ place that it could be and is therefore not realising its cultural and commercial potential.

The aim of the North Terrace Project is simply to initiate a Main Street-style regeneration by expressing a vision of North Terrace potential which would make obvious the benefits of investing in a coordinated approach to environmental enhancements and marketing, to businesses, state and local government and the community.
Key differences from standard Main Street targets

- North Terrace's status as a main street with a strong cultural focus in a capital city substantially broadens the potential community interest group and the project legitimisation process.
- The appeal of North Terrace generates considerable pedestrian traffic and interest.
- The environmental improvements needed are generally not shop-front enhancements able to be initiated individually by each building owner, although there are some bland façades and hard/unsympathetic building treatments.
- The Corporation of the City of Adelaide has a strong rate base and can play a significant financial role. However, the extent of council as opposed to privately owned public space with enhancement potential is considerable.
- The diversity of enterprises along its full length and especially the cultural/institutional components, gives it a more complex set of interests than commercial/retail.

Key reasons for North Terrace not realising its potential:

- Its use as a main arterial road for heavy transport and commuter traffic crossing the city means that its two sides are bisected by what is perceived to be a noisy and unfriendly pedestrian obstacle with only a few sterile pedestrian crossings. This traffic can visually and practically isolate the two sides.
- The south side, with its generally narrower, bare and unlandscaped public spaces and commercial retail focus, does not connect well with the more lush, broader and more relaxing north side with its cultural institutional focus.
- There is a lack of continuity (even on the north side) of the boulevard ‘atmosphere’ created by factors such as landscaping, outside eating, seating as well as defining areas and connections between them.
- There is a lingering ‘cultural cringe’ among sections of the community relating to its cultural institutional elements, reinforcing an image that North Terrace is not really a place for them.
- There is a lack of inviting and obvious linkages to the significant attractions adjacent to it.

Past attempts at regeneration

The Cultural Tourism Committee was not the first group in recent times to recognise and attempt to realise the potential of North Terrace. In 1983 a working group of the SA Museum Redevelopment Joint Standing Committee (led by Tourism and Arts Departments’ officers) tried to initiate a unified and exciting way to market North Terrace as an approach to regenerating interest in its cultural elements. The group proposed a significant media campaign (radio and print) costing $92,000 which would require corporate sponsorship to fund.

However, by mid 1985 things were at a standstill for a variety of reasons, including the lack of:

- agreement on the scope of the project (one-off promotional effort or a longer term approach);
- definition as to the extent of the precinct (the whole greater cultural precinct, just North Terrace or part of North Terrace);
- commitment to the need for the project;
- cooperation between institutions;
- continuity of personnel involved;
- commercial element to interest businesses;
- firm sponsorship commitments.

Additional difficulties related to the campaign concept. By attempting to sell North Terrace as an opportunity ‘to see the world’ (through international art and museum pieces, boulevard cafes, etc.) the campaign concept actually reinforced perceptions of South Australia’s cultural inferiority. It also targeted limited markets (only those which did not use North Terrace) and created an image with which existing users might not relate.

Eventually this promotional concept was abandoned altogether and the development of an information brochure focusing mainly on the cultural elements of North Terrace was produced. While the Treasures on the Terrace brochure was appealing, informative and reasonably well distributed, it obviously could not elicit the revitalisation initially intended by the working group.

With hindsight, it appears that while the media campaign concept proposed by the advertising agency fell short of what was required, the will of the key institutions to help create a better one was not there.

What is different now?

The years between 1983 and 1989 were very important in establishing a ‘cultural tourism’ context for the project and changing the perceptions of what was needed to regenerate North Terrace. Key elements to this evolution in thinking include:

- the requirement that most of the government cultural institutions part-fund their operations and the consequent gain of a more commercial outlook;
- urban design issues had become more widely discussed in Adelaide;
• concepts such as cultural tourism and Main Street programs had gained some exposure;
• some lessening of perceptions of South Australia’s cultural inferiority and an understanding of the value and interest of authentic and different cultures;
• Tourism South Australia had gained more staff and resources in its Planning and Development Division;
• market research undertaken for the Planning and Development Division of Tourism South Australia pointed to Australian travellers’ preferences for cultural, heritage and learning experiences (even over sporting and recreation activities).

These shifts in knowledge, outlook and travel preferences led the Cultural Tourism Committee to conclude that the time was ripe for a different approach to North Terrace revitalisation. A half day workshop in December 1989, involving representatives from over 50 institutions and businesses connected with North Terrace enthusiastically endorsed this conclusion.

However, it was thought that a number of initiatives were necessary to make it happen:
• an exciting vision of North Terrace’s cultural, social and economic potential needed to be expressed to convince, motivate and direct business, local and state governments and the community;
• the formation of a small collaborative organisation (and a network of ‘friends’) of those with an interest in and/or who stand to benefit from a revitalised North Terrace, which would cooperatively market North Terrace and act as a consultative channel for new initiatives;
• recognition that to make progress, business had to take over responsibility for the initiative and not expect government to direct the project;
• and the appointment of a full-time project coordinator who would be the initial prime mover and focus for action.

Funding the project

Even small steps require money and motivation, and so the committee turned its attention to the first of the initiatives listed above – expressing a vision of potential to generate interest and commitment.

Initially thoughts on funding the project revolved around establishing a significant trust fund by eliciting one-off donations through a sort of ‘investment prospectus’. This document was to express (visually and verbally) a vision of the potential of North Terrace, describe the benefits of realising the potential, detail a process to make it happen and contain a call to invest in the fund.

However, a number of factors forced a re-examination of that approach to funding:
• another ‘cause’ had actually tried that approach and received a slow response;
• the economic and investment climate was deteriorating;
• the legitimisation of such an approach required high profile patrons and formal government support as well as a detailed strategy in which to invest;
• the number of interested parties and the street’s broad ‘ownership’ meant that project consultation and legitimisation would be slow;
• the detailed planning required could not be undertaken with the limited resources available and so smaller steps were necessary;
• and the committee’s aim of initiating the project and then handing over responsibility for it to the private sector within the next (1990-91) financial year could not be realistically met.

A less ambitious and more suitable approach to progressing the project within the committee’s resource constraints gradually evolved. It was realised that the ‘investment prospectus’, while able to emphasise a vision of potential, could not contain a specific investment proposal. An intermediate step in the document’s development was the concept of recommending an approach to progressing the project, including the idea of calling for limited donations to fund a project coordinator or facilitator.

However, while this solution suited the position of the committee and government of handing responsibility over to the private sector, it still did not suit the framework in which businesses operate. The private sector is not keen to donate funds for staff and administration, especially without some commitment from government. Therefore, the recommendation that they pool limited funds to pay for a project catalyst was likely to be ignored. Government did not have the resources to fund the project coordinator as well as contribute to the environmental enhancements.

Finally, a less structured set of recommendations developed which did, however, suggest the roles the State government and the Corporation of the City of Adelaide could play in the revitalisation process. The expression of a vision of potential to convince and motivate was retained, but the notion of a partnership between the public and private sectors seemed more workable and it was decided to adopt the following strategy:
the Cultural Tourism Committee will invite a small number of key people to form an initial organising group to advance the project to the next stage - this group would be driven by the private sector and would explore funding, management and consultation options;

- business and institutions can take the initiative in maximising marketing impact by providing financial resources and information for cooperative marketing;

- the initiation of streetscapes and environmental improvements (including traffic management) by the Corporation of the City of Adelaide;

- State government can respond to business initiatives and commitment by contributing seed funding, publicity and infrastructure assistance.

Current status of the project
The document as described above is about to be printed. The committee is optimistic that the document's vision of potential will trigger business and community interest in enhancing North Terrace and act as a further impetus to organization, which will be the key to success. Having gained the support of both the Corporation of the City of Adelaide and the State government in the form of seed funding and commitment to the value of the project, the prospect of business reciprocating seems reasonable.

Reflections
One of the interesting observations for this project was the differing reaction to the notion of changing a favourite street. The thought that everyone would like to see a sensitively enhanced North Terrace was perhaps presumptive. For some, the fear of what might constitute 'sensitive enhancement' was enough to invoke a negative response to any change. While the aim of the project document was to express a vision of North Terrace's potential it was not intended to be the vision, and this needed to be stressed in consultations. However, most of the enterprises on or adjacent to North Terrace appreciated the difference. They agreed to the need for environmental improvements and accepted the fact that revitalisation could not come from marketing alone.

North Terrace has had different lives as a main street in Adelaide. For example, it was once a very elite residential area. Expressing the notion that it could become Adelaide's premier attraction for locals and visitors, elicits different visions and connotations depending on who is being addressed. The committee's intention was to enhance North Terrace as a place for locals and not as a 'tourist attraction'. However, what interests locals will invariably interest visitors and so North Terrace will continue to be a visitor destination. The fear of change which will only benefit 'tourists' is a reasonable one. Ensuring that the enhancements are understood to be for locals, will be a key to community support and project success.

The Cultural Tourism Committee and the North Terrace Project have acted as a catalyst for communication and cooperation between interested agencies, in particular the State government Arts and Tourism agencies and the Corporation of the City of Adelaide. The 'common ground' of cultural tourism has considerable potential to further this relationship.

References