

The Royal Opera House and Covent Garden: A symbiotic and complex touristic relationship

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Abstract

The Royal Opera House has a longstanding and solid relationship with Covent Garden, which is an environmentally clustered urban area for tourism and culture rich in heritage, commercial ambience and provision of different types of performing arts. Located within the core of the area opposite its popular market place, its opulent main entrance faces a less visited precinct. This makes the building less visible to the area's visitors raising questions about its role in the perception of Covent Garden. Given that current studies on flagship developments tend to focus on contemporary projects, this research aims to understand the influence that a well-established cultural flagship exerts in the perception of a popular area for tourism using the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden as a case study. To address this aim, a social constructivist approach was adopted and 306 semi-structured interviews were conducted with domestic and international visitors throughout six locations within the area to understand the role of the Opera House in the perception of Covent Garden. Findings indicate that cultural flagships tend to be stereotyped as grandiose freestanding buildings which is not the Royal Opera House's case given Covent Garden's urban density. Instead, its flagship status is related to the quality of its productions and its historical attachment to the area. This is rooted in the attraction of a diverse set of visitors and international talent leading to a cosmopolitan ambience and a strong sense of civic pride as the UK's leading provider of opera and ballet productions.

Keywords

Urban tourism, cultural flagships, cultural tourism

Introduction

Current studies on the role of cultural flagships in urban tourism tend to focus on novel developments and their impact on wider urban regeneration programmes (Grodach, 2010; Plaza and Haarich, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). However, the influence that a well-established cultural flagship for the performing arts exerts on the perception of urban areas for tourism and culture appears to be neglected. This indicates the need to conduct research on longstanding flagship developments and their role in the place-making system of the areas where they stand. Hence, this study aims to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on the Royal Opera House which is firmly established at the core of Covent Garden. This is a popular area in central London that is characterised by a strong commercial sector, urban density and an array of leisure opportunities. Covent Garden developed organically as a precinct for culture and commerce over many centuries alongside the Opera House, calling into question about its influence on the tourist's perception of place. Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the role of the Royal Opera House in the visitors' perception of Covent Garden. No previous studies examined the Royal Opera House as a tourist attraction indicating the value of conducting this research given its notoriety as the UK's most prominent provider of opera and ballet productions. In addition, contemporary research on flagship developments tend to focus on the visual and spatial. This research takes into account the flagship's function and its role in London's cultural landscape, not only as an architectural asset but also as a world-renowned cultural carrier of the highest standards. Consequently, it contributes to the understanding of well-established flagship developments not only from a visual perspective but also from a functional one using a longstanding Opera House that has never been the focus of tourism research.

Flagship developments have been identified as important elements of a destination's landscape that

play signifying roles shaping the tourists' perceptions of them (Smith, 2006). As indicated by Wing Tai Wai (2004: 245), 'as cities strive for globality, flagship developments play indispensable roles by signalling messages of economic development and cultural vibrancy'. Roberts and Greed (2001) also note that social and cultural values are associated and granted to buildings that can often acquire iconic status (Weidenfeld, 2010). In this sense, the association of architecture as an extension of culture plays a vital role in the understanding of what a cultural flagship represents for the tourist, the local community and the destination itself (McCarthy, 2005). In addition, de Botton (2006: 77) states that buildings 'speak' and that they have 'virtues to them' (p. 169) by communicating messages without words but merely by means of visual signs. Gorst (2003:1) agrees and asserts that 'buildings speak to us. They tell us about the economic and social structures of the times in which they were built. They speak of pride of ownership, of municipal or state power, and of commercial success' (also supported by Henderson et al., 2007). It is important to note, however, that cultural flagships as expressions of urban development and culture provision are subjected to different mechanisms of interpretation. This suggests that buildings may speak, but their significance is also determined subjectively by the individual (Silverman, 2013; Timothy, 1998). These frameworks legitimise the need to conduct research on the significance of a well-established cultural flagship. This study approaches the subject in the context of its role in the perception of an area that clusters commerce, architecture and a strong cultural sector such as Covent Garden where the Royal Opera House stands.

Literature review

Covent Garden's modern history began with the establishment of St. Paul's Church in its central hub which was turned into the area's Piazza in the first part of the 17th century. These developments are referred to as London's first experiment of town planning (Westminster City Council, 2017) and are an early example of urban regeneration. This is because the religious landmark and the attractive design of the Piazza which included a marketplace attracted further investment resulting in a lively and versatile sense of place (Miles and Paddison, 2005). There is a bilateral, beneficial and synergic association between commerce and performing arts in the area as its diverse place-making system appealed to creative individuals and institutions leading to the establishment of many theatres within its boundaries (Society of London Theatre, 2017a, 2017b). Stiff (1979) notes that throughout Covent Garden's history, its vibrant performing arts scene resulted in higher levels of activity and social interactions that complement its provision of shopping, eating and drinking facilities. In 1732, the first theatre at the site of the Royal Opera House was developed evidencing its enduring relationship with the area given its Royal association and central location next to Covent Garden Market.

The purpose of this literature review is to establish a conceptual framework on flagship developments and their influence on the urban settings where they stand. Secondly, cultural flagships for the performing arts will be discussed in line with studies that focus on grand theatres and their cultural and visual input to their destinations. An overview of the Royal Opera House's history and evolution is then discussed. This leads to a conceptual understanding of the role of flagship developments on urban precincts in the context of grand theatres applied to the Royal Opera House as a case study.

Cultural flagships

A flagship development can be understood as a 'significant, high profile development that plays an influential and catalytic role in urban regeneration, which can be justified if it attracts other investment' (Bianchini, 1993 as cited in Smyth, 2005: 4). Therefore, they have the potential of advancing urban progress as they attract and encourage the development of other urban elements around it (Boelsums, 2012; Doucet, 2007). These can include thriving commercial sectors, transport links and cultural activity (Grodach, 2010; Temelova', 2007). This notion is applicable to Covent Garden where a variety of land uses such as commerce and different forms of cultural provision are densely concentrated. Further supporting this, Bianchini et al. (1992: 28) note that 'the development of a flagship as an entity in itself is important, yet it is the wider promotional value that makes the flagship distinctive' (see De Frantz, 2005; Smith et al., 2011). Therefore, it is clear that flagship developments have the potential of projecting images that can ultimately be associated with the

destination as a whole (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2016; Brookes and Bianchini, 2006). These images however, can have different focuses depending on the functional aspects and the purpose that the flagship development serves. For example, commercial flagships are evaluated by Wing Tai Wai (2004), who refers to the case of Shanghai's Xintiandi to illustrate the efficient planning and management of developments that benefit a destination's image as a place for commerce. However, the author focuses on facilities towards the provision of leisure, entertainment, eating and drinking. Hence, a distinction should be made between these types of developments and those that focus on the provision of culture.

These notions indicate that as much as commercial flagships can stimulate the economic sector of an area or a destination, the cultural credentials of a tourism precinct can be enhanced by the presence of cultural carriers (Evans, 2003; i Agust'ı et al., 2017). Smith (2003: 159) also evaluates the relationship between cultural flagships and the areas where they stand by indicating that 'it is important in any cultural regeneration project that cultural developments are integrated into mixed-used (land) rather than constructing isolated arts centres or cultural landmarks which fail to generate further economic and social benefits for the local communities' (Rahbarianyazd and Doratli, 2017; Weidenfeld, 2010). Smith (2003) also proposes that cultural flagships and the areas where they are located can foster a mutually beneficial relationship through the attraction of a wide array of visitors seeking different experiences concentrated within them (Lorente, 2016). These frameworks are useful for this study as Covent Garden can be perceived and experienced as a place for culture. But this cultural provision has attracted further investment resulting in a vibrant commercial ambience.

It is also important to evaluate the cultural significance granted to a flagship development to the extent that it acquires cultural flagship status (Ram et al., 2016). Smyth (2005) proposes that these developments can acquire cultural significance when they are closely linked to a local culture and/or cultural activities (see Pastak and Ka'hrik, 2016). The author also notes their potential of engendering pride amongst the host community (see Evans, 2003). However, the context of the original purpose and development process of these landmarks will ultimately determine the cultural value assigned to them (Sklair, 2010). This value can be associated with a large scale approach to their architectural features and to their role as suppliers of culture (Colbert, 2003; Vazquez, 2016).

Grodach (2008: 496) comments that 'in addition to the physical and economic development implications of this clustering dynamic, cultural flagships may serve as a support centre for local artists and arts organisations by providing a space to meet and exchange ideas, creating opportunities for career growth' (Rahbarianyazd and Doratli, 2017). This approach relates to the notion of creative milieus, where creative individuals and organisations partner and network for the development of a precinct with a strong focus on culture and creativity (Comunian and Mould, 2014; Gregory, 2015). This is noted in the case of Covent Garden given the area's rich supply of different types of performing arts, from high arts at the Opera House to popular street entertainment in its central Piazza. Therefore, a flagship development's status as a cultural flagship can be associated with its visual value in terms of its architecture and its role as a supplier of culture. Adding to this, the impact it has on its urban environment given the visitors that are attracted to the area as a result (Ram et al., 2016; Weidenfeld et al., 2016). From a visual point of view, Cambie (2009: 115) indicates that 'an iconic building is one that shouts about its presence, that transcends its context and makes a commanding statement'. This suggests that both meaning and form are to be taken in consideration when appraising a building's status as an icon (Ivanovic, 2014; Sklair, 2006, 2010). Cambie (2009) concludes that their imposing presence in urban destinations can have a profound impact on their visitors' perceptions of place (see Litvin and Mouri, 2009). However, the approach does not entirely integrate function, visual traits and cultural meaning.

Grand theatres and cities

Mulryne and Shewring (1995) identify three major considerations to evaluate the significance of infrastructure for the performing arts in urban areas. In first instance, the hard infrastructure, constituted by the physical appearance, geographical location and other tangible aspects that can exert an important influence on the area's visitors' perception of place (Evans, 2005; Kong, 2007).

Secondly, the authors consider, the attraction of certain types of visitors to the area and the consequent social interactions and dynamics that occur as a result (Ferilli et al., 2017; Zieba, 2016). These interactions are not only amongst users, but also involve the local population, and other visitors in the area (Edensor, 2001; Smith, 2003). And third, the artistic dimension of an institution for the performing arts related to the quality of its productions. Hence, the physical image of the building, the attraction of visitors in the area and perceptions relating to the cultural product should be addressed for research purposes. In addition and regarding Opera Houses, Hofseth (2008: 103) asserts that ‘an analysis of the media coverage suggests that culture can be used as a lever for city development – not necessarily because of the inherent qualities of culture and art as such, but because of the role they can play by being coupled to other elements of urban development’ (see i Agust’i et al., 2017). This suggests that an Opera House’s cultural produce can be approached not entirely in isolation but relatively independently from the urban benefits that a flagship’s architectural presence projects on its urban settings (see Smith et al., 2011).

One of the most prominent cases of cultural flagships for the performing arts exerting a powerful influence on tourism precincts and indeed on a destination’s image is that of the Sydney Opera House. According to Thiel-Siling (2005: 96) ‘its development (. . .) intended to elevate Sydney’s cultural viability and visibility’ (Carter and Tyrrell, 2013). In regards to its physical appearance, its architect (Utzon, 1967) notes an emphasis on modern grandiose architecture resulting in the inclusion of the Opera House as an important element of the imagery projecting the city as a global destination for art and culture (Colbert, 2003). This indicates that it is not only the use of space or cultural meaning that grant a building the status of cultural flagship. But certainly, it’s visual appeal and the attraction of other businesses and visitors in its surrounding areas (Weidenfeld et al., 2010) Binnie et al. (2006: 103) link these notions to ‘cosmopolitan’ urban spaces where (there is) ‘an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other (entailing) an intellectual and aesthetic stance towards divergent cultural experiences (and) a search for contrasts rather than uniformity’ (Caset and Derudder, 2017). However, it also appears that a development’s urban detachment can play a central role in its acquisition of flagship status because of the enhanced visual exposure that a free standing location provides. This is clearly evidenced in the cases of the Sydney and Oslo Opera Houses for example (Cambie, 2009; Gorst, 2003).

Although many lessons can be learned from the Sydney Opera House, it should be noted that this is a contemporary development. This is also the case with Punter’s (2007) focus on the Wales Millennium Centre and its impact on the redevelopment of Cardiff Bay. But there is limited academic research on the longstanding Opera House and its relationship with tourism development, highlighting the importance of conducting this study. In spite of this gap in knowledge in a tourism context, Foot (2001) uses the case of La Scala in Milan to illustrate how an Opera House can reflect a society’s or a destination’s heritage, economic settings and cultural trends. According to the author: ‘(it) symbolized the reconstruction of the city, and the return of democracy (. . .) the new image of the city was reflected in the kitsch and design of the opening night opera-goers’ (p. 14). Foot (2001) also highlights the social perspective by which an Opera House contributes to urban development because of the range of visitors it attracts (De Frantz, 2005; Ferilli et al., 2017). Similarly, Crosby (1970) focuses on the Palais Garnier Opera House in Paris and notes the extensive conservation programmes it was subjected to as part of wider urban regeneration projects in the aftermath of the Second World War. This suggests that the significance of cultural flagships for the performing arts can be closely interwoven with a destination’s cultural heritage and developing legacy (Smith, 2015).

Case study: The Royal Opera House

The Royal Opera House has a longstanding and solid relationship with Covent Garden as there has been a working theatre on the site since 1732 (Donaldson, 2011). Having burned to ashes twice in a period of 50 years in the 19th century (Stiff, 1979), it also has a firmly established tradition of redeveloping itself and evolving both as an architectural asset of the area and as an institution (Hume, 1982, 2008). It actively adds to the provision of performing arts within London’s West End, identified as one of the city’s most unique and socially dynamic sectors (Hughes, 2000). This sector plays an important contributing role to the destination’s cultural vibrancy and reports a range of economic

benefits (Society of London Theatre, 2017a, 2017b). Located opposite the popular Covent Garden Market, it stands as the UK's chief supplier of opera and ballet productions (Mosse, 1995) that delivered 415 performances in the 2015–2016 season attended by 706,200+ patrons (96% occupancy) (Royal Opera House, 2017). It homes the world renowned Royal Opera and Royal Ballet companies and has endured as an institution many political and economic challenges throughout its history (Donaldson, 2011; Nopper and Lapierre, 2005). Among these continuing challenges is the configuration of the building itself. Its attractive Corinthian columned main entrance does not face the popular Piazza leading many visitors to perceive the building as 'hidden' from Covent Garden's central urban landscape. Some redevelopment schemes considered relocating the Opera House as a freestanding building in a different location at the end of the 20th century given the area's dense urban clustering (Tiesdel et al., 1996). But these proposals were rejected in view of the strong historical attachment between the area and the theatre (Glasson et al., 1995; Tooley, 1999).

In light of this, a £213 m redevelopment scheme was implemented responding to contemporary trends in urban design (Towse, 2001). It aimed to improve its outer physical appearance and service facilities (front of house spaces including bars, restaurants, a terrace overlooking the area and exhibitions open to the general public). Latham and Swenarton (2002) highlight that the benefits of this redevelopment were primarily related to the contribution to London's cityscape and cultural produce. But in spite of these efforts, Dixon (1999) indicates that 'London's Opera House belongs in Covent Garden (but it) can never have the grand symmetrical layout of other Opera Houses' (as stated in British Broadcasting Corporation, 1999: 76). This confirms that the benefits relating to heritage and authenticity of an Opera House set within its original site throughout centuries may also carry the challenges that this case study faces. Covent Garden does not provide the Royal Opera House with the visual exposure that the Sydney Opera House and other freestanding grand theatres enjoy throughout the world. But the theatre continues to attract large audiences raising questions about the influence that it may exert on the area's visitors' perception of place. For some, it may play a fundamental role in the area's place-making system. For others, it may be a subtle element among the host of stimulating factors within the area. This legitimises the need to adopt a non-foundational approach to evaluate the Opera House's role in the perception of Covent Garden as reflected in the methodological framework used to conduct this study.

Research design

Methodological approach–Social constructivism

Covent Garden is a diverse urban precinct characterised by a variety of elements that range from a strong commercial sector, a longstanding provision of an array of performing arts and distinctive architectural features. The Royal Opera House is an element of this portfolio of stimulating factors. These are perceived and interpreted subjectively and intrinsically by the area's visitors depending on their levels of cultural motivation (Du Cros and McKercher, 2015) and personal connectivity with the site (Marschall, 2015; McCain and Ray, 2003; Timothy, 1998). This indicates that a flexible approach to understanding the inner mechanisms of perception and interpretation is needed given the subjective nature of these processes (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Ryan, 2010). In this sense, the Royal Opera House may exert a fundamental influence on an individual's perception of place. Conversely, it may be lost amidst the host of sights and sounds that stimulate the area's visitors (Silverman, 2013). Therefore, social constructivism is a non-foundational approach that provides the flexibility needed to understand these processes (Flick, 2008) which supports its suitability to conduct this study.

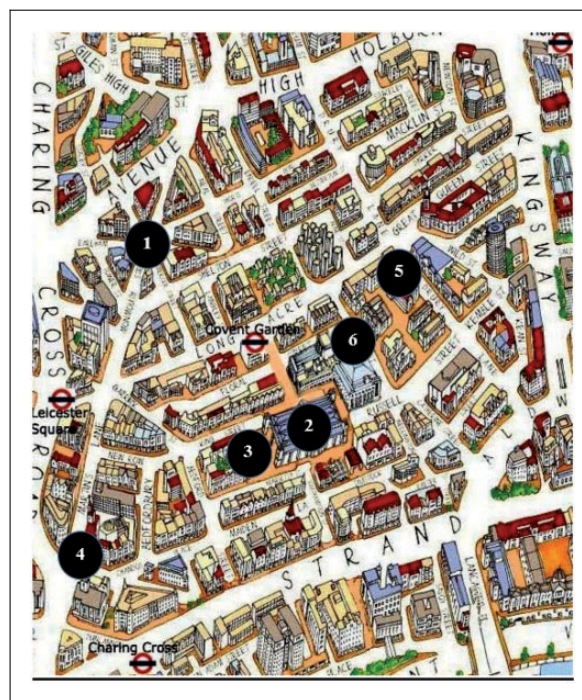
Research instrument and fieldwork design

The social constructivist approach adopted to conduct this research confirmed the need to use a flexible data collection tool (Creswell, 2014). The method would need to allow respondents to elaborate their views on the elements that influence their perception of place and whether the Royal Opera House exerts any influence on these processes. This indicates that semi-structured interviews would respond to these needs (Galletta, 2013; Rowley, 2012) given the use of a topical set of questions. These are then followed by probing questions which allow interviewees to further develop their views in length on specific topics of interest (Veal, 2006). In a tourism context, Smith (2010)

asserts that this is an inclusive approach to collecting data from a wide ranging set of visitors. Consequently, it is suitable for this study as this research focuses on a popular tourism precinct with extensive levels of tourist activity.

The area's popularity allowed for a high number of interviews to be conducted as 306 respondents were recruited to participate in the study. As this research aims to understand the influence that the Royal Opera House exerts on the perception of the area, it was important to capture data from a varied assortment of visitors. A convenience sampling approach was used as participants were recruited randomly in convenient locations and agreed to participate depending on their willingness and convenience for them to do so (Etikan et al., 2016). First time, repeat, domestic and international visitors were approached and invited to be interviewed about their perception of Covent Garden over the spring and summer seasons at different times of day and every day of the week. The field-work design factored in an array of interview locations that were both proximate as well as distant from the flagship building to ensure that wide ranging data was captured. These locations are illustrated in Figure 1 (In & Around Covent Garden, 2017) and included: (1) Seven Dials (a popular tourist resting spot); (2) Covent Garden Piazza (the central Market Place); (3) St Paul's Church (opposite the market); (4) St Martin's Lane; (5) Broad Court (less popular and peripheral areas within the precinct); and (6) Inside the Royal Opera House with daytime visitors (not attending a performance):

Figure 1. Interview locations.



©In & Around Covent Garden (2017).

The 213 interviews conducted throughout the area along with the 93 in-house interviews (leading to a total of 306) yielded data that varied greatly in length and quality. Some interviews lasted up to 45 minutes whilst many finished after three minutes depending on the respondents' willingness to expand their views or whether they had any views to develop. The success rate in participant recruitment was not recorded but tourists approached inside the Opera House seemed more willing to participate in the study. This is a limitation of the study along with the fact that data stemmed from Opera House interviewees could be construed as biased towards the significance of the building (see data analysis below). But as explained in the limitations section, the social constructivist approach adopted focuses on how each individual constructs and interprets reality. Therefore, this material is useful to understand these processes given the approach that this study uses. The topic guide was structured in

three sections. The first enquired about their motivation to visit the area, the second asked about the factors that influence their perception of Covent Garden and the third focused on the role that the Royal Opera House plays in these processes (if any).

It is important to note that this paper presents findings stemmed exclusively from the third section of the topic guide as it focuses on the influence that the Royal Opera House has on the interviewees' perception of Covent Garden. When this influence did not exist, many interviewees provided useful data regarding the role of other factors such as other tourists, the area's architectural character and commercial ambience among others (see Guachalla, 2016). Given that this paper is part of a wider study that focused on the area's place-making system as a whole, its boundaries and limitations are sharply established: it focuses strictly on the relationship between the Royal Opera House and Covent Garden as defined by the tourists interviewed.

Data analysis

The interviews were captured using an audio recorder and were transcribed manually when the data collection stage drew to a close as no new information emerged from the fieldwork (data saturation stage as defined by Fusch and Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). This exercise allowed for a holistic view of the data collected in anticipation to the formal process of analysing it (Christensen et al., 2015; Denscombe, 2014). Given the wealth of interview material that was captured, it was clear that to ensure a thorough approach to organising and analysing its contents (Punch, 2014), a computer-assisted data analysis tool was needed (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). For this reason, QSR N*Vivo was used as the main platform to facilitate the task of coding this material (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Phelps et al., 2007). The data was then subjected to a reiterative approach to coding it in two stages (identified as good practice by Chowdhury, 2015; Denscombe, 2014; Galletta, 2013). The first consisted of categorising the data in broad themes (nodes) reflecting factors that influence the perception of Covent Garden. It is at this stage that the Royal Opera House emerged as an influential factor for some interviewees. Therefore, the node was revisited to understand its significance leading to the findings presented below.

Findings and discussion

Out of the 213 respondents randomly recruited in different locations throughout the area, 87% were international tourists and only 13% belonged to the British domestic segment. Conversely, 38% of the interviews conducted inside the Royal Opera House were with domestic visitors indicating that the theatre exerts a stronger pull to the domestic British market than the area.

Figure 2. Interviewees' sociodemographic profile

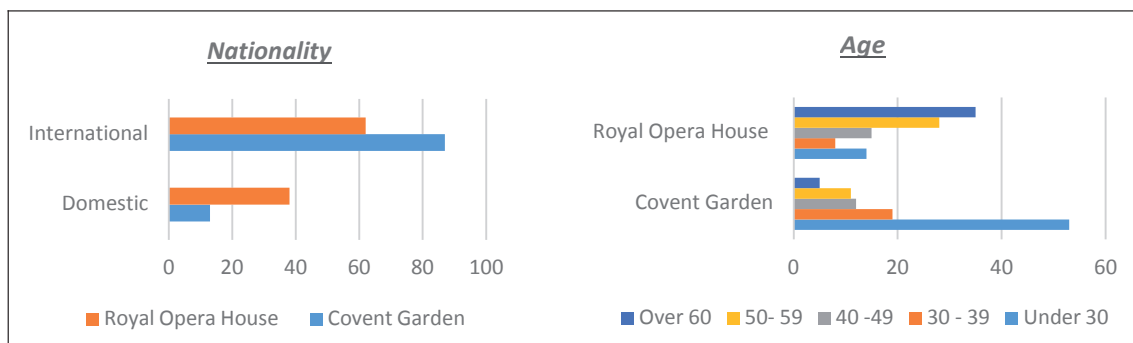


Figure 2 above also evidences that the area exerts a stronger pull to the younger tourist market with 53% of interviews in different locations outside the Opera House conducted with younger tourists below 30 years of age. The largest segment of in-house interviews were with tourists above the age of

60 (35%) indicating that the Royal Opera House tends to attract older visitors. Please refer to Guachalla (2016) for a detailed analysis of the influence of these sociodemographic indicators on the sample's perception of place.

The data analysis evidenced that there are three fundamental areas that influence the interviewees' views on the role of the Royal Opera House in their perception of Covent Garden. These are: (1) the building's physical appearance; (2) the theatre's relationship with the area; and (3) the array of visitors that it attracts leading to vibrancy, a cosmopolitan sense of place and national pride. Interviews conducted within the area are marked as 'CG' and in-house interviews as 'ROH'.

Physical appearance

The Royal Opera House's apparent visual concealment was extensively noted, with many interviewees stating that they could not identify the building despite its central location opposite the market:

"I was hoping to find grand architecture. Just the theatre and nothing else around it (. . .) When my friend pointed it out to me (. . .) all I could see were shops and galleries (. . .) I thought I would see a grand theatre like in other parts of the world. You go to Argentina and you see that the Colon is there, you can't miss it (. . .) That's what happens in London, it's very populated, very saturated and I feel like one thing is on top of the other (. . .) I would give it more space so that people could visualise it and realise it's there." (Silvia, Bolivia, CG)

This statement highlights the clustering of buildings and commerce in the precinct (Grodach, 2010) and that this is characteristic to central areas of London where urban density prevents standalone flagships from being developed. Hence, the 'flagship effect' linked to 'hard branding' of destinations such as Sydney (Carter and Tyrrell, 2013; Vazquez, 2016) is not directly applicable to the case of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. The area's clustering dynamic identified by Rahbarianyazd and Doratli (2017) as catalytic of urban regeneration through cultural policies resulted in a somewhat detrimental effect on the perception of the building. In spite of the economic synergies that this clustering strategy achieves between arts and commerce in the area (i Agust'1 et al., 2017), there is a clear implication to many visitors' awareness of the theatre as a result.

Regardless of the visual disadvantage that the location of the building has, it was also found that many interviewees do not perceive a cultural flagship of this nature according to its visual traits but for its role as a supplier of culture (Hofseth, 2008; Mulryne and Shewring, 1995). As agreed by Ferilli et al. (2017), Pastak and Ka'hrik (2016) and Zieba (2016), the significance of cultural flagships outside of its visual dimensions relates to the added economic and cultural benefits that they report to a destination. In this sense, even though flagship buildings can have a strong visual influence on the visitor's perception of an area (Colbert, 2003), the case of Covent Garden and the Royal Opera House is different. This leads to its architecture playing a secondary role in the significance of the institution in the view of many visitors:

"It's not just the building but what it represents, the art itself (. . .) to me it's more a matter of what it is but the building itself (Gerald, US, ROH)".

"Obviously it is not quite as flamboyant as the Sydney Opera House (. . .) but people talk about the Sydney Opera House more because of its architectural features rather than what it actually means as an institution for the art of opera (. . .) the Royal Opera House is probably the opposite case and it's a much more interesting place because of that. It's more about the performances that they give rather than the fact that it's a visual treat. That's not what opera is about; it's about the music and not about the building where it takes place." (Mike, UK, CG)

This evidence suggests that flagship developments tend to be stereotyped as free standing buildings

with opulent architectural features (Cambie, 2009; Thiel-Siling, 2005; Wing Tai Wai, 2004), often located in urban areas that may or may not also serve as tourism precincts (Smith et al., 2011). But the spaces they occupy and the area's morphology have a profound influence on their significance as perceived by the area's visitors (Ivanovic, 2014). In Covent Garden, the urban density of the area prevents the visual perception of the Opera House and its potential influence upon its visitors' perception of place is affected by the building's subtle physical presence. However, the visitor's cultural motivations and the Opera House's cultural produce (Du Cros and McKercher, 2015; Sklair, 2010; Timothy, 1998) play a pivotal role in the process of assigning meaning to this institution and its relevance to the area. This evidence can be linked to Lorente's (2016) approach to flagship developments in terms of their value as enabling platforms for the production of culture. Consequently, a tourism precinct's place-making system is enriched and its potential to influence a tourist's perception of it is enhanced (Smith, 2015).

Reciprocity between the area and the flagship

Many interviewees referred to the Opera House simply as Covent Garden, as if they were synonyms resembling Vazquez's (2016) stance on the attachment between cultural flagships and the destinations where they stand. Similarly, other respondents who were interested in opera or ballet (or both) directly associated the area's history as a precinct for culture and the performing arts to the presence of the Opera House:

“The words Covent Garden go with the Royal Opera House; everyone says Royal Opera House/Covent Garden. Or they say I'm going to Covent Garden or somebody is playing at Covent Garden but actually what they mean is the Royal Opera House.” (Dicle, Turkey, CG)

“I suppose because people have enjoyed it so much throughout the years, everybody knows about it and programmes are kept, parents tell their children about going and grandparents talk about it and it's just impossible to imagine Covent Garden without the Royal Opera House.” (Maria, Ireland, ROH)

Nevertheless, it is clear that this occurrence is more common amongst visitors that have an interest in the Opera House's cultural produce (Comunian and Mould, 2014; Du Cros and McKercher, 2015) in many cases due to their personal connectivity with it (Marschall, 2015). This was explicitly acknowledged by another interviewee who recognised that the extent to which the Opera House exerts an influence on the visitor's perception of Covent Garden is directly related to their affinity with the arts:

“I don't think that the Royal Opera House makes Covent Garden. It does contribute but I would say it contributes to the people that are interested in arts. Like if you go to an Irish pub here in Covent Garden, I don't think those people care if there is a Royal Opera House or not. But for those people who are interested in the arts, definitely, it's a reason to visit Covent Garden.” (Nicosia, Cyprus, CG)

In order to further probe this topic, interviewees were asked to imagine how Covent Garden would change if the Royal Opera House was located elsewhere and two very different perspectives were identified. The first indicated that it would not change because of the many other elements of its place-making system that attract a wide array of visitors (Doucet, 2007; Smyth, 2005) regardless of the presence of the Opera House:

“I think it would be largely the same because most of the people that come here come just to experience Covent Garden itself (...) there is obviously a sector of people who would come here for the Opera House but I think most people come here regardless of (it).” (Paul, UK, CG)

As noted above, these tourists' views can be linked to Rahbarianyazd and Doratli's (2017) perspectives on cultural agglomeration as cultural carriers propel the development of what i Agust'ı et al. (2017) refer to as ancillary enterprises. Covent Garden's vibrant cultural sector attracted an host of different types of businesses that range from small and large scale shops to eating and drinking facilities. Therefore, the clustering of a diverse set of experiential opportunities within the precinct (Boelsums, 2012; Temelova', 2007) may not necessarily benefit this cultural flagship given the area's heterogeneous place-making system.

There is on the other hand, another set of visitors that believe that the area would be missing a key element if the Opera House was located elsewhere. This view was mostly prevalent among in-house interviewees highlighting the pivotal importance of having an interest in it and a personal connection with the building and its purpose (Marschall, 2015; McCain and Ray, 2003). These interviewees' physical presence in the flagship is testament to their degree of cultural motivation in the context of high arts (Du Cros and McKercher, 2015). This evidences that the attachment between the flagship building and the area is socially constructed (Ram et al., 2016; Weidenfeld et al., 2010). It also confirms that there is a synergic relationship between both given the ample range of land uses and experiential opportunities available within the area (Evans, 2003; Grodach, 2010; Smith, 2003):

"I think the Opera House is the heart of Covent Garden. The whole history of the Piazza is tied up and linked with theatres and the Opera House. If you take that away it would still have some interesting characteristics but I'm very biased, I think it's the heart of Covent Garden." (Valerie, UK, ROH)

"I think it would lose its heart really. What makes it its heart? It's the quality of entertainment and the international acclaim it has as an Opera House. And the people that it draws to the area from all over the world. That would change if it wasn't here." (Andrew, UK, ROH)

Vibrancy and cosmopolitanism

The role of the Royal Opera House was not only evaluated on the basis of its architecture or quality of performances, but also in terms of the diversity of visitors it attracts and their input into the area's place-making system:

"There is the Opera House crowd that comes at certain times to see the shows. (They) bring an element to the area which is the theatre-going people and then there are people that are here for the shopping. It all adds together to make it a cool, vibrant place to be." (Ola, South Africa, CG)

"It brings a wonderful influx of people to Covent Garden. I feel that it is like an oasis of creativity being manifested. So for me it's very magical." (Kryisia, Australia, ROH)

Therefore, the significance of the Opera House to Covent Garden's sense of place acquires a social dimension (De Frantz, 2005; Edensor, 2001) which can also be related to the notion of cosmopolitanism (Binnie et al., 2006). Ferilli et al. (2017) highlight the strengthened social base that results from the attraction of a diverse set of visitors in areas for tourism and culture. This is evidenced in Covent Garden where cultural carriers for high culture such as opera and ballet attract visitors to the same area visited by those seeking more popular leisure experiences (Zieba, 2016). This in turn engenders a cosmopolitan ambience given the vibrancy and diversity among the area's contrasting set of users. Caset and Derudder (2017) link these settings to the concept of 'globality' as destinations evidence their leading status as major hubs for cultural tourism. They do so through the buildings that speak of their cultural and economic wealth. But also given the richness in diversity of the tourists that use them making active contributions to their sense of place (i Agust'ı et al., 2017; Smith, 2015). Further supporting this, many interviewees mentioned the importance of major flagship developments devoted to the provision of performing arts for any large city (Foot, 2001; Thiel-Siling,

2005), adding to their status as cosmopolitan destinations: “Most large metropolitan cities have an Opera House of their own and that’s a mimic of London anyways, or Paris, New York” (Alice, New Zealand, CG). Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2016) note the lasting impact that the use of culture can have on the perception of a destination’s brand and image (also supported by Carter and Tyrrell, 2013; Vazquez, 2016). The Royal Opera House plays an important role in these processes given the standards of its productions, longstanding relationship with the area and its social input in terms of the visitor flows it catalyzes.

Finally, a sense of national pride in the institution was identified amongst some domestic tourists, who praised the Opera House for being a leading cultural institution that represents the country globally. Therefore, it is clear that this case study fosters civic pride (Kong, 2007; Smyth, 2005) because of the world renowned quality of its performances and the international talent it attracts:

“It’s an essential element of the area, of the nation’s life. I think culture matters and it’s very high in culture. Can’t say I’ve been to the Royal Opera more than once, opera isn’t my thing. But nevertheless it’s as much of English national life as Lords, as Wembley and many other things (such as) the British Museum.” (Clive, UK, CG)

“It’s our heritage, I think it’s extremely important and it’s known world-wide as it attracts people from all over the world.” (Susie, UK, ROH)

This evidence indicates that even if domestic tourists do not have the intention to actively engage with the Royal Opera House or its productions, some acknowledge and value its leading role as the nation’s most reputable cultural carrier of this nature. Pastak and Ka`hrik (2016) propose that civic pride catalysed by cultural flagships may be dependent on levels of engagement with their cultural produce. However, the case of the Royal Opera House is different as it has been associated with other landmarks typical of London and given an important role in the nation’s cultural heritage. Therefore, the notion of personal connectivity supported by Marschall (2015) and McCain and Ray (2003) should always take into account the individual’s background in terms of origin (Guachalla, 2016).

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to understand the role of the Royal Opera House in the perception of Covent Garden. The findings of this study indicate that this cultural flagship’s physical presence does not exert a powerful influence on Covent Garden’s perceived urban landscape because of the area’s density and clustering of a variety of land uses. This is largely due to the lack of exposure of its attractive facade from the area’s Piazza which is its most popular precinct, regardless of its status as home of the Royal Ballet and Opera companies. However, it is important to note that the building’s physical features relate to the understanding of this flagship as an architectural artefact. Consequently, the Royal Opera House does indeed play a flagship role from the performing arts perspective as it produces opera and ballet of the highest quality engendering civic pride given the highly reputable nature of its work and heritage. But its status as a flagship building from a visual dimension is impaired because it is not visible from the area’s most visited locations characterized by a wide array of other leisure and commercial opportunities available throughout its many precincts. Nevertheless, it actively contributes to the area’s place-making system because of the diversity of visitors it attracts granting Covent Garden with a vibrant and cosmopolitan ambience and sense of place. It is therefore clear that the visual traits of a building may not be reflective of the value of the work that an institution delivers. However, the social dynamics that these institutions may catalyse can actively contribute to an area’s place-making system notwithstanding the visual impact of its outer physical presence.

Cultural flagships have been stereotyped as free standing buildings and are associated with grandiose and monumental architecture. But this research concludes that in this case, a monumental design can distract from the core activity of an institution, diluting its role as a flagship supplier of culture that enriches London’s tradition as a central hub for performing arts. The Royal Opera House’s quality of performance and status as one of the world’s most famous Opera Houses was never contested by any interviewees who were not only aware of its presence in the area but also had an interest in its work.

They indicated that they do not perceive the Opera House as an architectural artefact, but it is its role as the country's leading Opera House that underpins its importance. The same cannot be said about the Royal Albert Hall for example, which is an undeniable asset and famous landmark in London's cultural landscape. But it is not the permanent home to any artistic company, its function is that of a beautiful shell. Therefore, this study contributes to knowledge by concluding that powerful visual images provided by flagship developments may project messages of economic and cultural vibrancy. But in the case of Covent Garden, it is the Opera House's heritage and quality standards that grant its flagship status.

In terms of its relationship with Covent Garden, there is a synergic complexity between area and flagship as both feed into each other a contrasting set of visitors that result in a distinctively diverse and lively sense of place. The area provides a wealth of leisure opportunities related to shopping, eating and drinking for tourists. Conversely, the flagship attracts visitors with different cultural motivations seeking a very different range of experiences. Both sets of visitors amalgamate within the same precinct resulting in its vibrant and cosmopolitan ambience. Hence, in addition to the cultural contribution made by the Royal Opera House in terms of the quality of its produce, its role as a catalyst of social dynamics within the area also underpins its cultural significance.

A flagship is, by definition, the leading ship in a convoy of vessels, where the fleet's commander is based and the armada's flag is waved. In this sense, the Royal Opera House is indeed a flagship institution as one of the country's most important providers of high performing arts leading to strong feelings of civic pride amongst many British visitors. For people who appreciate these art forms, it can even be interpreted as an iconic institution because of its heritage and all the famous performers and performances that it housed over centuries. However, none of these qualities are related to the building's exterior physical makeup as suggested by a variety of studies on flagship developments. Consequently, and although current research focuses on the visual dimensions of cultural flagships, their function and social role should not be neglected. This is evidenced by the active contributions that the Royal Opera House makes to Covent Garden's sense of place because of the visitors it attracts and its central role in the nation's cultural fabric.

Limitations and recommendations

The area's popularity allowed for a large number of interviews to be conducted which yielded extensive qualitative data making the evidence analysis process demanding and complex. For this reason, it would have been feasible to apply a quantitative approach to illustrate the relative influence of the Royal Opera House in the perception of Covent Garden using statistical measures. It is important to consider, however, that this paper presents findings stemmed from interviewees that had views to express on the Opera House and its role in the perception of the area. This was not the case in all interviews conducted and therefore the qualitative approach adopted was suitable given the objective of the wider study. This was to understand the factors influencing the area's visitors' perception of place – the Opera House being only one of many potential factors. This is the study's main limitation as the high number of interviews conducted could have allowed for the relative significance of these findings to be quantified. In this case, it was not feasible to quantify the qualitative data collected as the interviews conducted were semi structured. Therefore, the probing questions leading to these findings differed considerably depending on the direction that the interviews took as per the tourists' views. It should be noted, however, that the social constructivist paradigm adopted to underpin this study focuses on how each individual constructs reality. Hence, this study has presented qualitative analyses based on the nature of the data collected, not its relative frequency. In view of this, future research could focus more sharply on the relationship between the area and the Opera House using a quantitative approach that measures the degree to which the sample believes that it is an important element of the area and for what reasons.

It is also evident that further probing could have been applied to better understand the attachment and connectivity between each interviewee and the Royal Opera House. Given the strong views expressed by many tourists, it is clear that their personal backgrounds (including occupation, lifecycle stage, upbringing and education, etc.) could have been further analysed in line with their interest in the work

of the Opera House. This would allow for a deeper understanding of each individual's levels of cultural motivation and their underpinnings. Hence, it is recommended that further studies are conducted focusing solely on cultural tourists who regard the Royal Opera House as a fundamental factor in their perception of the area and the foundations that root this personal connection.

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