Title
Review of MacCannell's - The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30w9w3qd

Journal
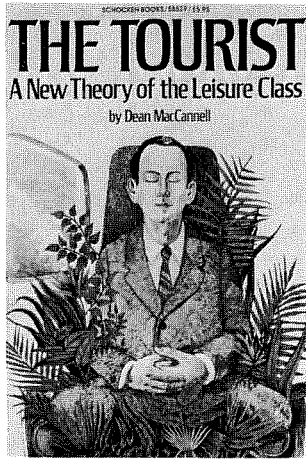Places, 1(1)

ISSN
0731-0455

Author
Relph, Edward

Publication Date
1983-07-01

Peer reviewed

Dean MacCannell,
*The Tourist: A New Theory
of the Leisure Class*
(New York: Schocken Books,
1976)

Visitors to Saint Paul's Cathedral in London are now admitted through new revolving doors in the west entrance—hardly a dignified way to enter a cathedral, but apparently a necessary device to prevent tourist jams. Other English cathedrals have resorted to economic rather than architectural solutions to handling the flow of visitors in the form of prominently located collection boxes. The money thus collected helps to finance restoration work by charging admission from those who come to look rather than to worship. As Dean MacCannell sees it, the modern world is one vast tourist attraction designed for the use of those who are just passing through, collecting new places and new experiences. The old and rare are preserved for the tourist's brief gaze; nature is their playground; cultural and social events—especially those in national costume—are staged for their instamatic record. We may consider ourselves serious travelers, in contrast to the consumers of package tours, but no matter how or why we travel, we necessarily share the tourist world, whether in the airports and hotels we patronize or in the commercial attractions we encounter.

The thesis of *The Tourist* is that the tourist represents modern man in microcosm, surrounded by commercial images and enticements,
searching for meaning in life and new experiences, and consuming whatever he encounters along the way. Using an ethnographic approach MacCannell tries to look at modern culture from within, rather than to detach himself from it. He supports his argument with his own experience, evidence drawn from brochures and guidebooks, and bits of overheard conversation. The results are presented with wry humor (but no illustrations) and analyzed from various perspectives—Marxism, structuralism, semiotics, and ethno-methodology. He occasionally wavers between social criticism and analytic social science, and, in the end, while I do not think the results add up to the new theory of the leisure class that is advertised in the subtitle, I was not disappointed. *The Tourist* is a serious and original attempt to uncover the social structure that lies behind tourism. Whatever the validity of its theory, the author has made some perceptive comments about the character of modern culture, and his insights cannot be ignored by responsible designers and managers of the built environment.

Tourism is a pleasure to many of us and I hesitate to be too earnest about it. It seems a harmless enough activity, and whatever political and economic problems it might pose seem
minor compared to most. On the other hand the energies of millions of people, entire regions, and substantial parts of national economies, are tied up in the tourist industry, and it ought not to be dismissed as incidental merely because it is supposed to be fun.

MacCannell points to two related reasons for the popularity of tourism. First, it is a ritual through which we confirm our belief that people are different: travel allows us to see how our own lives differ from the lives of others, especially of the poor and sedentary. At the same time it allows us to absorb those differences into our experience and to test what we have read or seen on television against reality. Paradoxically, of course, tourism erodes the very differences it celebrates, for it inexorably reduces them as it introduces into the sightseers's realm of experience the identical set of conveniences and attractions that tourists have come to expect at every place they visit. The directory entry for the Holiday Inn at Equitos in Peru reassures potential customers with this message: "International Airport 3 mi., free transportation. Near Amazon River & Jungle. Lounge, Disco."

MacCannell also argues that tourism is an attempt to uncover realities suppressed or hidden by modern commercial culture.

THE TOURIST
A New Theory of the Leisure Class
by Dean MacCannell
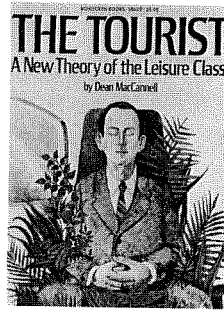
Consider plastic flowers, vinyl leather, fiberglass oak beams, mock-Tudor houses, and false identities for towns (the town of Kimberley in British Columbia has taken on a Bavarian façade complete with *Wilkomen* signs, a Stadtplatz, bands, and "Bavarian" gas stations to boost its tourist trade). Florida oranges were once dyed orange and stamped "artificial color added." Reality has to be reinvented, reconstituted, and otherwise improved to maintain its commercial appeal. No doubt someone benefits from this, and it may not seem to matter much that oranges are made to be more orange than they are. But small deceptions can lead to bigger ones, and soon it may be too late to ask questions about truth or honesty. Hope lies in the moment of the disappointment that still comes when we realize that the flowers are plastic, and MacCannell argues that many of us still believe that truth and honesty live on in whatever remains of precommercial cultures.

So off we go hoping to find something honest in fragments of medieval cities, Gothic cathedrals, Indian pueblos: there one can still perhaps glimpse "real life." In this respect, architects and designers have long been tourists in their enthusiasm for traditional craftsmanship and unself-conscious building. But just as tourism effaces differences, so it destroys the truth it seeks

through the application of what MacCannell calls "staged authenticity," whereby places and events are not left as they are, but are contrived to look as tourists expect them to look.

Tourism has assumed a pervasive and symptomatic form in modern times in exemplifying the extent to which leisure has replaced work as the foremost social activity for more and more people. In a study of Paris, MacCannell shows how work can itself become a curiosity for tourists. As early as 1900 tours of Parisian factories, stock exchanges, sewers, and the abattoir were on the serious traveler's list. As manual labor becomes an increasingly scarce commodity, it also becomes a form of recreation—helping to build Paolo Soleri's city in the desert, for example, or volunteering assistance on archaeological digs. That tourism is taking on this form and turning into a quest for the real thing seems to me to be an important observation. I was, therefore, disappointed that MacCannell did little with it in his conclusion. If I understand his final chapter correctly, he proposes only that ethnographic approaches can help to provide a firmer foundation for tourist management, that tourism should be integrated into conventional community planning, and that developing countries should take care to profit from it.

These suggestions can only exacerbate the problems he tells us that endless sightseeing produces. The conclusions and applications I garnered from my reading of *The Tourist* are quite different, and they have important implications for the aims of environmental design as I understand them.

Current practice suggests that environmental design can be defined either as a set of techniques for achieving efficient plans or as the application of behavioral science to create places that will produce obedient citizens. For those who accept these definitions, the greatest challenge to their skills must be found in theme parks and shopping malls where total design is possible because the parts can be subjected to all the manipulations necessary to guarantee maximum efficiency, pleasure, people flows, and profits. These are controlled environments in which authenticity can be faked and artful deception can be brought to perfection. MacCannell's analysis clearly implies that the designers of these environments are supertourists given the techniques they use to contrive places for ordinary tourists to visit. These supertourists engage in promoting the type of modernity that causes Dean MacCannell to wonder how a society that has no allegiance to truth and commitment can be called progressive.

There is, however, another way of considering environmental design. It ought to be concerned with finding ways to recreate places in which people can live as free and responsible citizens and in which they can enjoy working at tasks that exploit neither other people nor natural environments. MacCannell's demonstration of the distortions of tourism remind me both of the necessity and of the difficulty of achieving those aims. The aims may be idealistic, but this idealism is not in itself a fault. In *The Causes of World War Three* the sociologist C. Wright Mills argues that it is no longer enough to offer so-called realistic or practical solutions—they simply make a bad situation worse by rendering problems ever more subtle and intractable. He maintains that instead we must develop ideals and hold them with conviction. In an era when authenticity is manufactured for tourists, technology constructs the environment, and the threat of nuclear annihilation is constant, utopian thinking may be the only kind of thinking that can be humane and reasonable. If so, then environmental design has a fundamental role to play in translating it into reality.

Edward Relph

59