Urban tourism

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URBAN TOURISM

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Introduction

As transport and communication technologies continue to progress and information becomes all-pervading it would seem as if our world is constituted purely by flows of which rapidly growing international tourism is one. Indeed, now dominant production factors, time, information and capital, remain highly mobile. This mobility is expressed in the ways people "invest" their time in travel and how online information presence is becoming vital to secure a place's seat in the minds of the globetrotting masses. At the same time growing awareness of local culture, place attachments and valuation are clearly observable. Thus, friction is manifest, e.g. in the search for meaningful and authentic place experiences by the very same masses. But whilst factors of production seem to continue to be borderless and the world of tourism booms, these only become so through grounded processes in particular places (Amin, 2002). This chapter will focus on urban tourism and the ways in which it manifests global mobility in Iceland.

Tourism plays a role in urban governance, affecting planning and thus impacting the city fabric and attitudes and livelihoods of its residents in diverse ways. Indeed, changes in the urban caused by rapid development of tourism are not always positive and expected by residents (Waddell, 2002) as for instance increasing concerns about overtourism in cities manifest (Milano, Cheer and Novelli, 2019). In this sense tourism is a "vehicle for transition, an integrated part of transitions, and a consequence of transition" (Müller, 2018, p.2). A key task remains to challenge the seemingly footloose nature of tourism flows and tourism investment in the city to sustain residents' place attachments. With emphasis on the role of infrastructure development in Iceland, this chapter shows how the creative city discourse is to facilitate mobilities and related infrastructure development, thereby tapping and stoking "the creative furnace inside every human being" (Florida, 2005, p.5). How can urban tourism become a platform for a host of mobilities sustaining the city in a global urban tourism hierarchy, where creativity is the norm, and at the same time introduce a multitude of new mobilities and ways of being within the city itself? From international airport development and ideas of Aerotropolis (Kasarda and Lindsay, 2011) to city-bikes and fusion restaurants, tourism adds flavour to our modern cities but not without potential detrimental side effects.

This chapter will proceed in two parts before a summary conclusion. Firstly, we will present an understanding of globalised tourism and how tourism mobility ties together localities and globalised flows. Our case is the city of Reykjavík, Iceland where we will explore how the city is linked with global tourism flows through the infrastructure developed to receive it and how that channels the flow of tourism through the city and to the attractions of the island at large. Secondly, we will present our take on the urban and how it is constituted and maintained through a dense network of mobilities, augmented by tourism; again, through our case study in Reykjavík and its emphasis on being a global cultural attraction and cauldron of creativity. A particular example thereof and a consequence of tourism mobilities is Airbnb.

The globetrotting masses

Through the democratization of travel, transport technology developments, ubiquitous internet use and growing global affluence, international tourism is booming. Globetrotting tourists are seen as part of the frictionless flow of capital, information, culture and goods, and cities competing in a global marketplace are meant to entice these. Indeed, some of the key attractions in global tourism are cities such as Paris, Bangkok and New York, but apart from these iconic urban nuclei, small cities vie for a share in the flow of international tourists (Richards and Duif, 2019). For them to catch their share of the flow, friction needs to be created, i.e. the flows need to be grounded and funnelled towards meaningful experiences offered in specific destinations.

Tourists to Iceland almost all arrive on medium to long-haul flights. Boundless open skies, which came to be with international aviation agreements post 1992, allow any airline to connect almost any places in the world. The concomitant growth in aviation and lower fares worldwide facilitate tourism mobilities globally. But each trip is meant to take you somewhere and this somewhere has travelled to the minds of the potential visitors through a myriad of wirings facilitating the mobilities of images, ideas, advertisements and social media communication. Once physically travelling to the place in question, these mobilities become palpable and move from an image in the mind to actual presence, which requires a different set of infrastructures. This infrastructure is the first tangible sign of friction for the mobile individual. In the case of Iceland this would be Keflavík International airport (KEF airport), adjacent to Reykjavík city. The airport is the hub which almost all inbound tourism to Iceland will go through and it is the only functioning year round gateway to the country. In 2018 just under 10 million passengers passed through there, up from under 3 million in 2012 (see Figure 32.1). As is made clear from the masterplan of the airport, outlining investment plans till 2040, this airport is to treble in size and capacity.

Figure 32.1 shows the post 2010 boom in inbound tourism to Iceland to date. The lines show foreign overnights in all accommodation establishments, passengers through KEF airport and foreign departure counts at KEF airport by the Icelandic Tourist Board (ITB). All three give a comprehensive idea of inbound tourism in Iceland. In addition, cruise ships also visit the island. In 2017, 135 cruise vessels berthed in Reykjavík carrying in total 128,000 passengers plus crew. Almost all passengers from these vessels are day trippers (excursionists) and thus not counted as inbound tourists. The only alternative means to aviation and cruising in getting to Iceland is by ferry from Denmark to the port of Seyðisfjörður. This ferry carried just over 22,000 passengers to Iceland in 2017 (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2019).

As Figure 32.1 clearly shows, inbound tourism takes off after 2010. KEF airport is a 45-minute drive from Reykjavík city. The airport is serviced by shuttle buses to the
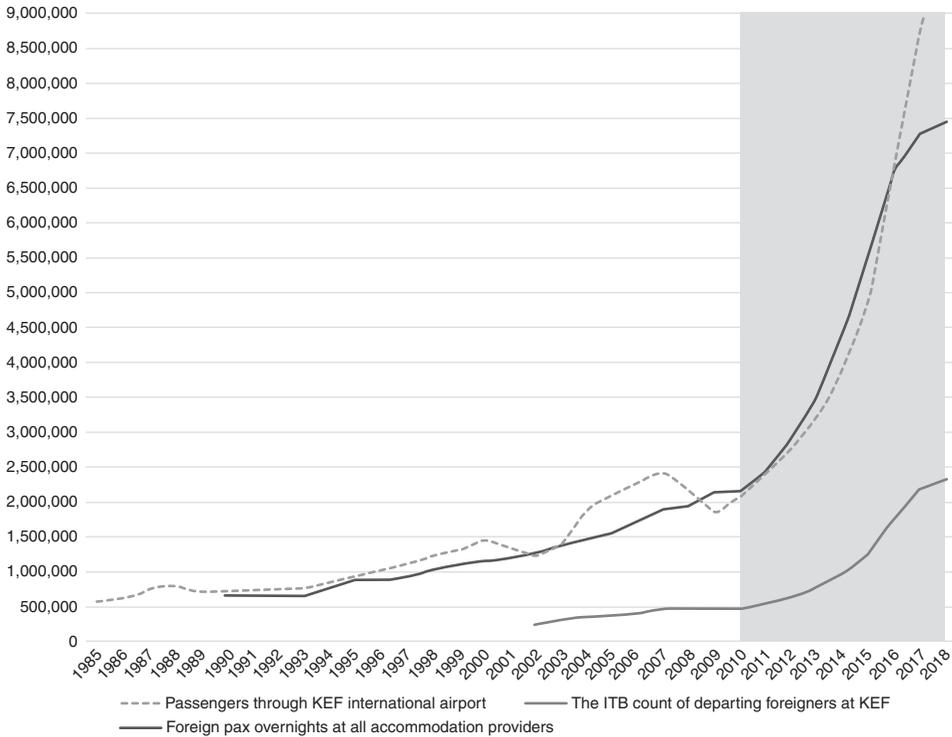
Figure 32.1 Inbound tourism in Iceland.
Source: Icelandic Tourist Board, 2019

city centre which are not linked up with the local system of public transport in the city or to the rest of the island. The only road from the airport will take these buses, tour buses and others, opting for e.g. rental cars, through the city. In addition, anyone wanting a domestic flight will need to visit the Reykjavík downtown airport. So in effect, almost all those visiting Iceland will use the city as their base of mobilities around the country. With year-round inbound tourism traffic growing every month, seasonality has all but disappeared in the city. Yet it persists throughout the country, demonstrating how access to the rest of the country is orchestrated by this disarticulated system of transport from the city heartland. To get to the rest of the country a rental car is necessary if fuzz free travel is the aim. In winter, with shorter holiday periods and more challenging weather and road conditions, visitors become city bound. Reykjavík thus sees year round tourism, transforming its service infrastructure, tourism amenities, accommodation and attractions. To more effectively funnel the inbound tourist into the country a proposed high-speed rail link is now being negotiated with the relevant municipalities en-route from the airport to Reykjavík. This would be the first ever railway of any capacity built in Iceland (Fluglestin, 2018), but again it will place all those coming from the airport squarely in the city centre of Reykjavík as of 2023, maintaining it as the actual platform for a tourist encountering Iceland.

The positive economic effects of tourism in cities have been recognised for long, leading to the rise of the city as a tourist destination (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Judd and

Fainstein, 1999). Visitors' movement patterns affect the scope of infrastructure, transportation development, product development, destination planning and the design of new attractions. To date, the city planning of Reykjavík and its link to Keflavík has been focused on accommodating the private car. This is part of a pan-European legacy of automotive hegemony "in which functionalism and notions of 'the modern city' inspired urban planning" (Gössling, 2017, p.3). This can most readily be seen through the fact that car rental in Keflavík is the most expensive in Europe as the only means to get from the airport, apart from the shuttle, is by private car (see Figure 32.2). In years 2017 and 2018 some signs of improvement to this can be noted, but not transforming the prevailing state to any degree.

Figure 32.3 shows the results of winter and summer surveys performed by the Icelandic Tourist Board amongst departing tourists from 1999 till 2016 when queried on what means of transport they used during their stay in Iceland. As can be seen, rented cars comprehensively overtook organised coach travel in the year 2016. The number of registered rental cars has grown by 20% year on year since 2012, whilst inbound tourism numbers grew by 24% in the same period. At the same time the number of coaches in the country grew by 8.1%, partly attributable to the growth in cruise ship arrivals, but the dominant mode of travel from these are half or whole day excursions on a coach from and to the port of call.

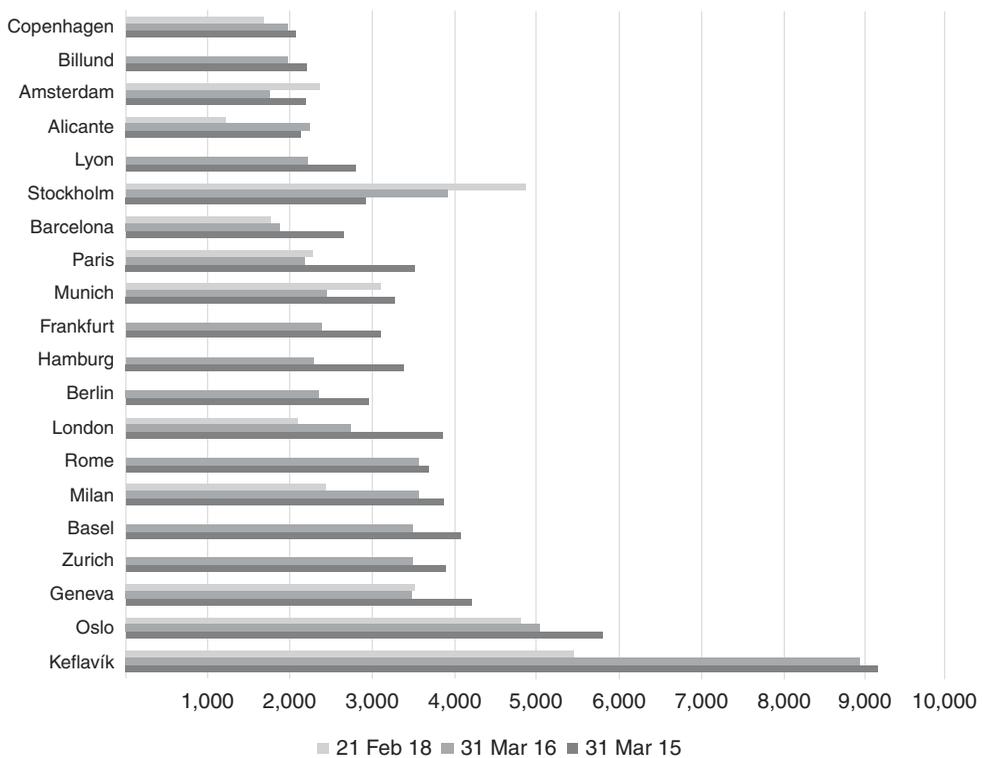
Figure 32.2 Rental car prices from Keflavík airport, compared to select European cities.
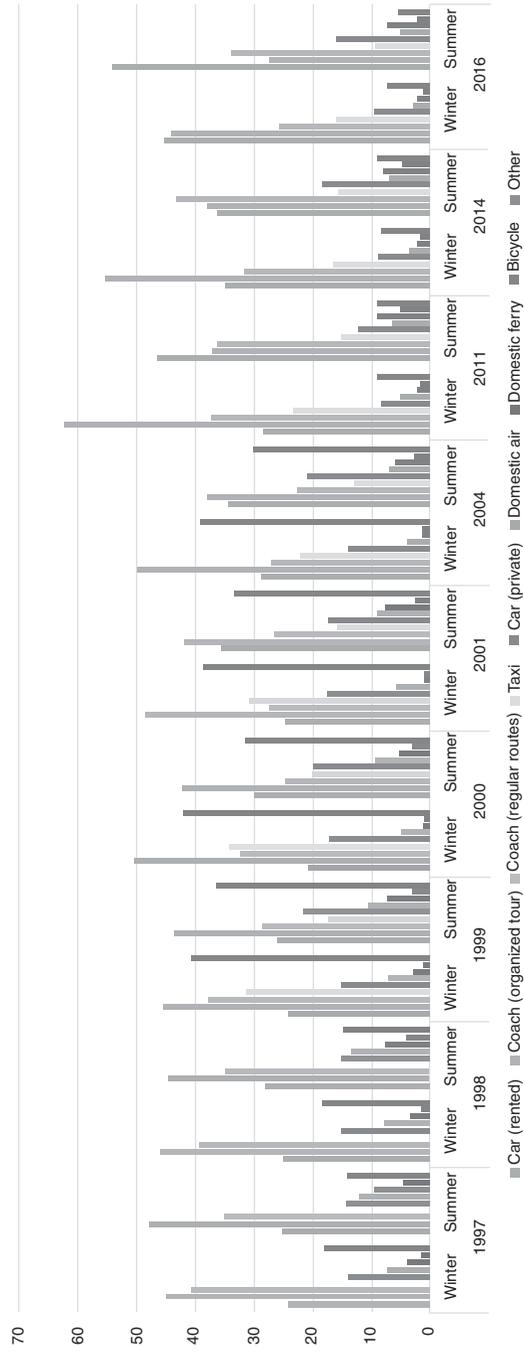
Source: touristi.is

Figure 32.3 What means of transport did you use during your stay in Iceland?, 1996–2016.

Source: Icelandic Tourist Board, 2018

As Gössling (2017) will remind us;

> Movement, in contemporary society, is 'at the center of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the microgeographies of everyday life'. Consequently, movement is no longer a choice, rather it is a necessity; opportunities to be mobile shape society as much as mobility patterns are now shaped by social norms and expectations.
>
> *(p.34, citing Cresswell, 2011, p.551)*

The expectations of many visitors to Iceland, not least during the summer season, is mainly to complete the ring-road, a 1,332 km road that circles the island. For that, a rental car is imperative. The ring-road is not wholly serviced with public transport, so doing a bus trip around is impossible unless bought as a tour package. What Arnason (2015) calls "the lure of the ring" shapes the travel patterns on the island and it starts in KEF. Being mobile in the rental car allows you to explore and visit places on the ring according to your own schedule, laid out on your individual smart device, but with consequences.

> This "self-generated" evolution of the Ring Road from basic transport venue to scenic route has arguably had serious consequences for tourism management in Iceland, e.g. by undermining efforts to disperse the ever-growing numbers of visitors more evenly around the country. Paradoxically, the increased mobility offered by self-driving is offset by the urge to "tick off" all the main scenic attractions dotted alongside the Ring, which in turn leads to ever more congestion in these already over-loaded areas.
>
> *(Arnason, 2015, p.199)*

Indeed the democratisation of travel, decisions pertaining to KEF airport development and ubiquitous internet use are impacting modes of mobilities in Iceland. However, transport technology and infrastructure developments lag considerably behind, leading to several "wicked problems" in the context of tourism as identified by Urry (2016, p.132). The main "wicked problem" faced in the city of Reykjavík and the sites on the ring-road to be "ticked off" is increasing concern that the city is becoming a victim to overtourism, manifest in congestion, with rental cars and tourist coaches crowding destinations and city streets, in particular in the downtown area and the hollowing out of the city centre as a residential area. The response from the city of Reykjavík can be seen in initiatives such as the ban on coaches entering the downtown area, effective from 15 July 2017 (see: https://busstop.is/) and the introduction of city-bikes to rent by one of the two major Icelandic airlines; Wow air (see: https://wowcitybike.com/), sadly now bankrupt. Elsewhere, the only response has been to pile gravel on grassland to extend parking lots as close as possible to the attraction itself.

The urban

The urban is constituted and maintained through a dense network of mobilities, tourism being an integral part thereof. Cities generally provide a dense amalgam of tourism services and a base from which to constitute personal networks of mobility as we have demonstrated in the case of Reykjavík above. In this respect, access to and access within the city prove to be fundamental to a city's status when it comes to globalised urban tourism. But moreover, attractions are needed and a particular vibe (Judd and Fainstein, 1999; Page, 1995; Vanhove,

2017). Tapping the perceived benefits of tourism, many cities have developed access through airports and high-speed mass transits and attractions by reconstructing their down-towns and waterfronts to accommodate cultural vibrancy and creativity.

The "authority of infrastructure" which Easterling (2016, p.71) explains as undeclared in the dominant stories portraying it, is where the balance of flow and friction becomes manifest in the urban landscape; that which facilitates mobility and yet sustains the urban fabric. Cities have promoted various initiatives and campaigns to support and expand the growth of tourism, mobilising the cultural, social and physical capital present in the process. The expansion and prioritisation of the tourism sector in urban development strategies and the manifold impacts of the growing presence and prevalence of tourism on urban spaces and on the life of residents have generated new contestations of, and conflicts over, the visitor economy and tourism development in cities. These conflicts often seem to revolve around the negative effects tourism has, or is believed to have, on neighbourhoods (Colomb and Novy, 2014; Milano, Cheer and Novelli, 2019).

The pervasiveness of the private car and problems of congestion when it comes to tourism mobilities in Iceland and the city of Reykjavík result from the emphasis on road infrastructure manifesting to date the undeclared pan-European legacy of automotive hegemony. The road connecting Keflavík with Reykjavík has been expanded and improved several times, but always to accommodate private cars, not any other means of mobility. Above and beyond ease of access, the city also strives to promote why people should come. The redevelopment of the city's waterfront and downtown area is emblematic thereof and they are couched in stories of creativity and cultural vibrancy. Harpa, the culture and event centre completed 2011, despite Iceland's financial meltdown in 2008, proudly proclaims in its online adverts; "Experience award winning architecture. Discover the wonders of Harpa, Reykjavik" (see: https://en.harpa.is/). Adjacent, the Edition hotels chain of Marriott is opening one of its "luxury boutique" hotels in 2019. This particular brand of hotels are located in gateway cities worldwide, such as Bangkok, Abu Dhabi, Bodrun and Shanghai, and they are meant to make you "feel different because they make you feel something". Feeling something here refers to you being able to "rub shoulders" with locals and experience "authentic design" (see: www.editionhotels.com/the-idea/). These emblematic figures of a "placeless aesthetic" are symbolic rather than anything else (Frampton, 2007). They are meant to convey local connectedness for the globally footloose, i.e. tourists, grounding a globalised culture of commerce and design (Eldemery, 2009). The Harpa/Edition complex is a large-scale building project meant to secure Reykjavík a place in a global city competition for both residents and tourists. It is part of a process of spectacularisation of the urban environment often with the paradoxical effect of infrastructure becoming more homogeneous (Ponzini, Fotev and Mavaracchio, 2016).

A running theme of this spectacularisation in infrastructure development is the notion of "creativity", which also is closely related to urban tourism development. What is to spur your mobility to a certain place is the sense that it is a bustling cauldron of creativity. City planners and administrators adopt the notion claiming that the developed urban infrastructure will accommodate creative people and foster creativity (Gibson, 2010; Landry, 2000; Richards, 2014). This creativity is grounded in a wider discussion on the role of culture for innovation and economic development, most often emphasising how the creative capacity of individuals is a decisive factor for the prosperity and competitiveness of regions and places (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Florida, 2005; Gibson, 2010; Gregson, Simonsen and Vaiou, 2001). Tanggaard (2013) points out that this innovation conception of creativity casts individuals as entrepreneurs and responsive to societal changes. Accordingly, some seem to be

more creative than others, for instance the "creative classes" (Florida, 2005), which are set to attract businesses and create jobs as well as giving places a necessary flair of "coolness". Also tourism is being used to vouch for a city's creative credentials. If tourism is booming and people are coming in droves, surely the city is a creative cool place? Thereby even the smallest and most remote cities are projected onto the global tourism map (Richards and Duif, 2019; Romão, Kourtit, Neuts and Nijkamp, 2018). However, creative cities strategies are often controversial. According to Borén and Young (2013, p.1801) "Certain forms of creativity become valued by urban elites and enjoy support from public funding, often with an international audience in mind". Thus, creative city programmes may be boiled down to particular gentrification projects, promoting a certain set of values of what is a positive development and who are part of that process, sustaining present class segregation or even inventing new lines of inequality in the city.

Most city developers abhor "mass" tourism and have adopted a positive disposition to creativity and coolness. City marketing and branding is about enticing the culturally savvy and enlightened tourist, making the city into an eventful and creative entrepôt to their respective countries or hinterland (Alberti and Giusti, 2012; Alvarez-Sousa, 2018). Beyond the above outlined classic waterfront development in the city of Reykjavík, the concept of creativity is put forth in tourism policy and city planning documents in various contexts, albeit loosely defined. In concrete terms, the development of Reykjavík as a creative city is most evident on the one hand in efforts to extend the city centre along the harbour area, creating a more vibrant city environment with a mix of traditional harbour facilities, tourist shops, art galleries and restaurants and on the other in investing in various cultural events such as book fairs and concerts. The increase of tourism is both a reason and an outcome of these developments. More particularly Airbnb is a creative city ideal where the savvy urban tourist, motivated by "deals" and "ideals" assemble their own experiences through their mobile online devices, motivated by word of mouth. This particular example of grounded tourism mobilities is certainly impacting the urban fabric in Reykjavík.

Airbnb is an example of a direct platform of communication and commerce between the consumer and producer, allowing for variety and creativity by both. This platform is most certainly disrupting the role of the established accommodation provider (Guttentag, 2015), but moreover it is disrupting urban fabrics worldwide. Adamiak (2018) reports that Reykjavík ranks eight among European cities when it comes to number of Airbnb listings per 1,000 inhabitants. The only capital city to rank higher is Lisboa (#6) whilst the others in the top ten are tourist cities such as Venice (#4), Split (#2), Batumi (#1) and Marbella (#3). Landsbankinn Economic Research obtained data in 2017 on Airbnb operations in Reykjavík through the analyst firm Airdna, the same source as Adamiak (2018) used, which gathers current information from Airbnb's website. They estimate that Airbnb stays numbered over 1.1 million in Reykjavík alone in 2016, exceeding 40% market share in accommodation there in the summer of 2016 and with an estimated 46 million EUR turnover in the city (Landsbankinn, 2017). Compared to the accommodation nights represented in Figure 32.1, the 1.1 million represent 16% of the total inbound tourism overnights at established accommodation providers. According to the Directorate of Internal Revenue, 4% of registered properties in Iceland are listed on Airbnb, although this has to be an overestimate as individual rooms for let are considered as whole property (Reykjavíkurborg, 2017, p.20). Arguably Airbnb has helped people deal with the aftermath of the economic crisis in 2008 and created value for property owners, but as another bank, Íslandsbanki (2017), argue in their annual analysis of tourism, Airbnb has "played a large role in hiking property prices in Reykjavík" (p.23) as the number of apartments rented far

Table 32.1 Rental price index in
Reykjavík, year on year (Jan–Jan)
increase in %.

Year	% growth from Jan previous year
2012	11
2013	7
2014	8.5
2015	8
2016	5
2017	11.5
2018	9

Source: Registers Iceland, 2018

exceeds the number of apartments built in the same period. In the same way rental prices have steadily gone up in the city, also attributed to Airbnb (see Capacent, 2016, p.80). Table 32.1 shows the development of the rental price index of the capital region as compiled by Registers Iceland (2018).

As Table 32.1 clearly demonstrates, rental prices have gone up fast. The consequence is a serious housing shortage for low-income households and concomitant social problems, such as serial relocations of single parent households. Tackling the housing issue in Reykjavík was the key debate in the spring 2018 municipal elections and the role of tourism in contributing to the problem was recognised. So another transformation wrought for the benefit of friction is one where housing becomes a commodity for tourism rental, pushing locals out, in particular those socio-economically disadvantaged.

With this critical analysis of the infrastructure formulae manifest when it comes to grounding tourism mobilities, we have shown how Reykjavík's waterfront and downtown have become ubiquitous markers of a placeless aesthetic firmly aligned with the jargon of creativity in city planning. At the same time, housing is marketed online for tourists allowing them to tailor their experiences and capitalise on the best deals. Both these processses have ramifications for the urban fabric and society at large. Urban tourism is talked about in terms of guilt free mobilities, creativity and coolness but in reality it is based on business as usual, turning a profit for those privy to the global world of flows.

Conclusion

In the opening of this chapter we asked how urban tourism can become a platform for a host of mobilities sustaining the city in a global urban tourism hierarchy and at the same time introducing a multitude of new mobilities and ways of being within the city itself? We have shown how through facilitating mobilities for tourism through airport master planning and expanding road networks the urban fabric of Reykjavík is undergoing transformation. The city vies for a spot in the global urban tourism hierarchy, introducing new developments, but set within the prevailing paradigm of automobile hegemony, the consequences are manifest i.e. in congestion and housing market upsets.

"[C]onnectivity is the platform for fuller societal development" (Khanna, 2016, p.341) and "[m]obility thus ought to be one of the paramount human rights of the twenty-first

century" (p.359, see also Jensen, 2005, p.144). The individual traveller is at the heart of our ever more interconnected world, but which mobilities are provided to the visitor and how do they become of paramount importance when it comes to the future of our cities. According to a McKinsey (2016) report on the future of mobility, electrification, shared mobility, and autonomy are the key mobility trends. According to the report, effective mobility relies on efficient public transit, ease of cycling and walking and shared modes of transport facilitated by ubiquitous internet and smartphone use. This will limit congestion and pollution in the urban, but requires coherent public sector interventions to develop the necessary infrastructure and modes of transport. What is readily visible in Iceland, however, is the fact that infrastructure development is lodged within the pan-European legacy of automotive hegemony (Gössling, 2017, p.3). Rental cars have become the dominant mode of transport and although ideas are on the table for rail links and integrated public transport, none have materialised. In addition, as Urry (2016) will remind us, "But this fast-mobility city will only develop if a new post-carbon energy system is innovated and implemented around the world" (p.140). Beyond the contentious issues of tourism's carbon footprint, questions remain whether growth in mobility is good for happiness, wealth and quality of life (Whitelegg, 2015)? But this we leave for another chapter.

We claim that for urban tourism to be of benefit to the cities it needs to be delivered from the ground up, from the citizens themselves hosting those visiting and catering to their needs. The urban as emergent through global flows is a political project that needs to be grounded amidst the residents and their visitors. Thereby urban tourism can contribute to healthier globalised communities, and the mobilities outlined by McKinsey (2016) are more likely to cater to this.

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