
4 'A New Narrative of Place': Neolocalism and Heritage-based Tourism

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Place-attachment can be strengthened through storytelling and a heightened consciousness of local history (Schnell and Reece, 2003: 57)

Abstract

It is the purpose of this chapter to experiment with 'a new narrative of place' by exposing 'nodes of geographical meaning' and to explore the action of telling a story through the medium of heritage-based tourism. Using particular episodes from the history of Australia as a case study, the intention has been to unlock some of the mysteries and potentials of places and 'things' and their contributions to a distinctive neo-local identity and purpose. To do this, this study has drawn into the discovery process a number of conceptualizations and methods from the disciplinary toolkits of geography and semiotics. This approach, whilst focusing attention on a particular form of commercial neolocalism with its dependence on a special 'sense of place' and associations with that place, has been designed to expose the opportunities of linking neolocalism studies to the expansive domains of tourism studies, heritage studies and studies in regional science.

Introduction

Although commentaries about the phenomenon of neolocalism have been active for several decades, and the portfolio of case studies continues to grow, one of the exciting aspects of this area of study is that it has the potential to provide a portal of access to many companion areas of study. It always, so it seems, has 'sense of place' as a core focus. Whether the scholarship is concerned with the fundamentals of neolocalism *per se*, or with any one of many possible case studies of fitting commercial or industrial activity, or community development, or lifestyle preferences to those fundamentals, the end-product can often challenge conceptualisations about 'sense of place' and how it can be managed so that those fundamentals are impacted advantageously. This is a study area where, among others, there are perspectives from aesthetics, culture, economics, environment, geography, politics, psychology, and sociology that can bring enlightenment to the processes of appreciating, understanding, creating, and sustaining 'sense of place'; and it is in this expansive context of opportunity that this chapter is set.

The purpose here is to consider the nature and scope of neolocalism from a perspective and position that is somewhat different from what may be described as 'mainstream', and because of this, it may be interpreted as being explorational and experimental. Three issues are used as anchor points for the exploration. One of these has a link to neolocalism through the speculative propositions from Schnell (2013) about 'a new narrative of place' and from Ryden (1993) about 'nodes of geographical meaning'. The aim of this study is to consider what those propositions offer for the study of neolocalism. A second anchor point particularises the subject matter of the case study. Telling a story from history through the medium of heritage-based tourism is the focal point; it will be an example of commercial neolocalism. The third anchor point is concerned particularly with methodological issues, and its operational focus is to engage with a form of multi-methods research in order to expose and refine the usefulness of the body of evidence that tells a story through tourism. By working through these three issues, the over-arching aspiration is to nudge the profile of neolocalism studies towards a frontier that focuses on 'commercial neolocalism' and, more ambitiously, towards the expansive domains of tourism studies, to heritage studies, and even towards studies in regional science. Although approached in this chapter as a single task, it almost amounts to three experiments in the one study.

This might sound as though the whole exercise will be esoteric, designed to satisfy a longing for an ill-defined objective far beyond the core of neolocalism and its focus on such 'mainstream' issues as quality of life, lifestyle, environment, and 'least disturbance' from outside forces. Certainly, the drive through this chapter will be to achieve some outcomes that are pitched in research areas of methodology and even in popular culture; but the core issue will be to tell a story from the history of Australia through the medium of heritage-based tourism as a case study of commercial neolocalism. There is already a recognisable volume of case studies that loosely associate tourism with neolocalism, and these are studies that have a focus on, for example, microbrewing, retailing, antiques and books, food and drink and other local festivals, and experiencing the lifestyles of particular cultural and ethnic groups (Frank, 2018; Gibson & Connell, 2011; Holtkamp et al., 2016; Michael, 2002; Trollinger, 2012). Beyond these lie the always-inspirational commentaries of Shortridge (1989; 1996; 2005).

Among the most often-cited foundational commentaries about neolocalism are those of Flack with his description of neolocalism as an attempt 'to re-assert the distinctively local' and as a response to 'a landscape in danger of losing its uniqueness' (1997: 38), and of Shortridge with his suggestion that neolocalism is 'a deliberate seeking out of regional lore and local attachment by residents' (1996: 10). Building on more than two decades of their own experience and research, and drawing from the ponderings of many commentators, Schnell and Reese have ventured an opinion that neolocalism is the 'conscious attempt of individuals and groups to establish, rebuild, and cultivate local ties, local identities' (2014: 168). Embedded in some of the commentaries are references to such matters as identities, images, landscapes, local ties, places, place-identity, place-personality, 'sense of place' and traditions, and references to such inspirational sources, as for example, Cosgrove and Daniels (1988), Relph (1976), and Tuan (1980, 1991). Recently, Schnell and Reese have made the effort to tie many of these elements and sources together into what they have described as 'this powerful concept of neolocalism' (2014: 167).

It is from this background that the two propositions of Schnell and Ryden have been plucked to drive this study. Whereas, because of the weight of his published work, it may be claimed that Schnell is a substantial commentator to both the foundational literature on neolocalism