CHAPTER 7

London's 'Unseen Tours': Slumming or Social Tourism?

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the work of Unseen Tours, a not-for-profit social enterprise based in London which offers a source of income to homeless, formerly homeless and vulnerably housed Londoners by employing them as tour guides. The aim of this chapter is to raise awareness of the work of Unseen Tours in the context of London's changing visitor economy and to relate it to the wider debates on slum tourism (Freire-Medeiros 2013; Frenzel and Koens 2012) and societal change in the city (Paddison and McCann 2014). There is a fine line between selling and commodifying poverty and making a social contribution to poor peoples' lives, for example by creating new and alternative livelihoods as part of the ethical and responsible tourism agenda (OBrien 2011). This chapter calls not only for the inclusion of homeless tour guiding in the debates over the tourism-poverty nexus, but also for increased research efforts into this recent social phenomenon.

What follows is a discussion of the extent to which the tours could possibly be seen as a new kind of 'western' slum tourism, selling poverty as an attraction (Freire-Medeiros 2009), or whether they challenge prevalent perceptions

of homelessness. Although the aims of slum tourism products vary, this kind of tourism has faced major criticism in recent years, with commentators questioning the ethics of tourism consumption based on poverty (Meschkank 2011; Rolfes 2010; Freire-Medeiros 2013). By discussing the relevant literature, as well as reflecting on the work of Unseen Tours, and comparing it to international examples of homeless tour guiding, this chapter argues that the project has the potential to contribute to positive social change in line with the ideals of social tourism (McCabe et al. 2012). While this chapter acknowledges that Unseen Tours cannot solve the homelessness problem in London, the organisation does have the power to create new opportunities and visibility for those experiencing homelessness whilst enabling them to play a role in in London's tourism sector. At the same time, the tours fulfil tourists' ever-present demands for encountering the 'authentic' (see Chapters 2 and 3) and help to diversify the tourism offer in London, distributing benefits beyond the traditional tourist centres to more 'edgy' urban destinations (Smith and Pappalepore, 2015), in line with the territorial expansion of tourism in the city.

'Unseen Tours': The History of a Social Enterprise in Tourism

Unseen Tours is a London-based social enterprise that was founded in 2010 to address the rising problem of homelessness in the UK's capital city. In a country as prosperous as the UK, the growing numbers on homelessness remain shocking, with government statistics revealing that in the year 2017, 4,751 people were sleeping rough in England's streets, which constitutes an increase of 15 per cent from the previous year (Homeless Link 2018). London is at the very centre of the problem. Out of all regions in England, London alone saw 1,137 rough sleepers in 2017 (Homeless Link 2018). These numbers do not even fully reflect reality as they do not include the 'hidden' homeless, with people couch-surfing on friends' or strangers' sofas or sleeping on public transport (Butler 2018). Some argue that the Conservative government's policies are to blame for the situation in London, including a lack of supply of affordable housing, and a cut in housing benefits as well as funding for homelessness services (Butler 2018). More specifically, the Local Housing Allowance Reforms that started in 2011 introduced obstacles preventing lower income households from accessing private tenancies, particularly in inner London (Crisis 2018). While the government is now trying to take action to address this problem, for example with the coming into force of the Homelessness Reduction Act in April 2018, key problems remain which 'relate to the growing structural difficulties that many local authorities face in securing affordable housing for their homeless applicants' (Crisis 2018, xiii). In addition, the social stigma around homelessness is a major problem, with a study by homelessness charity 'Evolve' revealing that 72 per cent of people in the UK believe that homeless people themselves are to blame for being in or remaining in the streets (Evolve 2018).

Unseen Tours seeks to address the problem of homelessness by employing homeless or vulnerably housed Londoners and raising awareness to put this problem back on the government's priority list. The organisation was established as part of the 'Sock Mob', a small group of people who ventured into the streets of London with food, drinks, material goods (including, but not limited to, socks), to listen to, to talk and to learn from London's rough sleepers. Since it began, The Sock Mob has grown into a more than 600-strong network of like-minded individuals from all walks of life, providing companionship and support for lonely and isolated people living on the streets. The network enables people to socialise and meet in different social contexts, including boat trips, bowling, picnics and other leisure activities. The idea of walking tours led by homeless people emerged from these activities and evolved into a formal enterprise: Unseen Tours.

Unseen Tour's members were inspired to create the very first pilot program after gaining a closer understanding of homelessness and seeing how creative and resilient their street friends were. They found that homeless people had great stories to tell, but often did not have access to paid opportunities to harness and nurture these qualities. Their intention was to come up with a different and revolutionary idea that would change perceptions of homelessness by cutting through negative stereotypes and social stigmas. The idea that gave birth to the organisation was twofold: changing how people saw and thought about homelessness, whilst helping vulnerable individuals directly. The social enterprise officially launched its first tours in August 2010, and since then it has employed 20 homeless and formerly homeless tour guides who have guided both national and international tourists around different areas of London: Brick Lane, Camden, Shoreditch, London Bridge, Brixton, Mayfair and Covent Garden. This list includes areas that are off the beaten track but also those that are normally part of tourists' bucket lists. Unseen Tours still has a close relationship with the 'Sock Mob', and both organisations continue to support homeless people and challenge attitudes towards homelessness through their own projects in London.

London is not the only European city where homeless tour guiding allows tourists to explore the city off the beaten track. Vienna, Prague, Berlin and Barcelona also offer organised tours by homeless and vulnerably housed residents. For example, 'Shades Tours' in Vienna (established 2016) aims to reintegrate some of the 10,000 homeless people into the Austrian job market. It currently employs 18 guides and has already helped two to secure their own flats, and another two to enter the job market (Shades Tours 2018). According to Shades Tours, the aim of the project is empowering homeless people by giving them a task and motivation, self-confidence, an income and new opportunities (Shades Tours 2018) whilst helping visitors change their views of homelessness, thus increasing tolerance more broadly.

Changing stereotypes is also at the core of the homeless tour guiding project in Berlin, where 'Querstadtein' (established 2013) has bridged the divide between

'homeless people and the rest of society ... [and] create[d] a space which would facilitate encounters, exchange and awareness' (Querstadtein 2016a, n.p.). One of the tours on offer is 'biographical … [and] touches on East–West German history, survival strategies for both the past and present, and the designs and uses of public spaces' (Querstadtein 2016b: n.p.). More recently, the project also started to involve refugees as guides to increase understanding of the challenges faced by this vulnerable group and to foster integration in times of crisis (Querstadtein 2016b). Querstadtein is a good example of using tourism as a tool for empowering disadvantaged residents while, at the same time, addressing the issue of a different kind of mobility – migration (UNWTO 2009).

An in-depth analysis of the above-mentioned projects lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but important differences can be noticed. Not all of the homeless tour guiding initiatives currently recorded in Europe take the form of not-for-profit social enterprises, which means that, while achieving social impact, some are essentially profit-orientated. The motivation behind Unseen Tours is not profit-making but philanthropy. Its members can be seen as 'change agents' as Sharis and Lerner (2006) regard many of today's social entrepreneurs who aim to achieve social and environmental progress. Some subsume contributions that social enterprises make under the broader terms of 'community tourism' or 'responsible tourism' (Mottiar 2016). These normative ideas have shaped tourism literature and practice for several decades and aim to achieve sustainable benefits for local communities and environments (Goodwin 2011; Scheyvens 2002; Telfer and Sharpley 2015). The important difference is that social enterprises are characterised by specific business models which generate profits just like traditional businesses but reinvest these profits into social and environmental causes (Bornstein and Davis 2010). Hence, as Sheldon et al. (2017) argue, a 'social entrepreneur can simply be defined as one who uses business principles to solve social problems' (4). Social entrepreneurship is therefore a more 'modern' way of pursuing philanthropy by initiating projects that are proactive and lead to sustainable change, rather than focusing on reactive giving through donations and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Novelli et al. 2015).

As a social enterprise working in tourism, Unseen Tours' not-for-profit business model is unique in that the organisation is run by unpaid volunteers who have full-time jobs, and work on Unseen Tours in their spare time. They support tour guides but it is the guides who design the tours and their content. This is not the case in other homeless tour guiding projects in Europe. At least 60 per cent of the money raised from the sale of Unseen Tour tickets goes directly to the homeless and vulnerably housed tour guides, with the remaining revenue used for essential operational expenses. This allows the social enterprise to cover guides' expenses (mobile phones, transportation costs), training and upskilling, as well as any essential operational costs. Any profits Unseen Tours make are directly reinvested back into the enterprise to engage more guides and widen the scope of their tours. In doing so they 'balance social goals

with the need to generate revenues' (Day and Mody 2017, 67), a challenge that most social entrepreneurs face. The volunteers who run the organisation do not financially profit from the organisation, and all the money raised through ticket sales is used for the social purposes for which Unseen Tours was founded. Unseen Tours also works to challenge the negative stereotypes associated with homelessness more broadly through their social media, outreach, events and the content of the tours. This remains an important part of the organisation's work to this day, also for the guides themselves:

> I like it because you can change people's perceptions on homelessness, and [they] see us as individuals rather than a group. They get a better understanding of what it's like to sleep rough and how they struggle to get by, how lonely it can be and that it can easily happen to anyone (Viv, Covent Garden guide).

Unseen Tours assists in 'includ[ing] groups into tourism that would otherwise be excluded from it' (Minnaert 2014, 283), which is essentially how social tourism is defined. This inclusion can either be of disadvantaged tourists by enabling them to participate in tourism activities, or of residents who are excluded from the tourism industry. Minnaert et al. (2006) discuss visitor- and host-related social tourism, with the former focusing on Western countries while the latter concerns mainly residents in developing countries.

Figure 7.1: Viv on a Tour through Covent Garden (Photo: Unseen Tours).

Unseen Tours operates within the Global North, but many of the social enterprises focusing on the inclusion of disadvantaged residents in the tourism industry can be found in developing countries. They are often connected to alternative tourism development projects, which should offer more ethical, responsible and locally beneficial alternatives to mass tourism (Mowforth and Munt 2016). While these developments (such as community-based tourism or ecotourism) are centred on a participatory and community empowerment ethos (Scheyvens 2002), they also constitute a more morally sound product for consumers (Butcher 2003), and satisfy tourists' search for authenticity (Dolezal 2011; 2015a). Butcher (2003) questions the raison d'être of these alternative forms of tourism. He suggests these fulfil the desires of tourists, in line with wide-spread neoliberal ideologies, whilst failing to deliver tangible change on the ground.

Poverty has become an attraction in itself (Baptista 2010; Freire-Medeiros 2009), particularly in the developing world, where slum, orphan, poverty or charity tourism increasingly appear on tourists' itineraries. This commodification of poverty is regarded as problematic not only because of the voyeurism involved, but also for benefiting an elite that uses poverty for their own ends (Frenzel 2013). Homeless tour guiding is not exempt from this kind of criticism. *The Guardian*, for example, refers to Prague's social enterprise Pragulic as a kind of 'poverty tourism' (Allen 2016) and *The Independent* discusses Unseen Tours' work under the terms of 'poorism' and 'slum tourism' in a Western context (Taylor 2011).

A cursory glance at the idea of homeless tour guiding may evoke certain similarities to slum tourism and poorism, by turning poverty into an attraction in Western cities. The question is: are such parallels justified or does the work of the social enterprises discussed above, particularly that of Unseen Tours, contribute to positive societal change? This chapter will try to answer this question and point to the ways that Unseen Tours enables London's marginalised residents to empower themselves.

The Tours: London's Vulnerable Residents at Work

A typical Unseen Tour starts by meeting a guide in the chosen area who will introduce themselves and explain what led them to join as a guide. Tourists then follow the guide on a walking tour through the neighbourhood, which is usually also the area where the guide him/herself lives. According to Frenzel and Blakeman (2015) this ultimately signifies to the tourists that the knowledge the guide transmits is more credible and 'real', thus making the tour overall more 'authentic' (this notion will be discussed later in the chapter). The content of the tours varies from person to person, but usually the guides share historical and social knowledge of the area, intertwined with their own opinions and experiences of homelessness. The areas of interest include major attractions

and some lesser known and personal ones which may not have previously been evident as attractions to tourists. On Trip Advisor, tourists speak mainly of the educational aspect of these tours: they appreciate seeing a new area of London, but also like gaining new knowledge about it.

Finding original paintings by the famous street artists 'Stik' or 'Banksy' is not something that tourists necessarily expect from a homeless tour in London's Shoreditch, for example. Other tours bring visitors to hidden community gardens on the Brick Lane Tour or Bridget Jones' front door near London Bridge – thus helping to uncover some more hidden elements in the city that appeal to tourists. The same is the case when tourists learn more about the meaning that the guides attribute to certain places in the neighbourhood, the best and warmest places to find shelter and hear some personal stories about daily experiences of homelessness and social stigma. Figure 7.2, for example, portrays David, the London Bridge tour guide showing tourists the Shakespeare street art near the Globe Theatre, while also talking about the anti-homeless architecture in the area, which was constructed to prevent homeless people sleeping in public spaces. The guides thus narrate their own stories and experiences throughout the tours which gives tourists a different perspective on the city and makes every tour unique. The purpose of the tours is to show people a historical London with an 'unseen' dimension, through the lens of homelessness.

Another aspect of the tours is the conversations they create about other social issues that the guides are passionate about. For example, the Brick Lane tour

Figure 7.2: David on the London Bridge Tour Discussing Homelessness and Social Stigma (Photo: Unseen Tours).

looks at the history of suffrage and multi-faith communities in London, whilst the Shoreditch tour highlights gentrification, which is extremely visible in that part of London. This opportunity for the guides to weave in their personal opinions with local and world history allows visitors to see London in a new light. Viv, Unseen Tours' Covent Garden guide, confirms this:

> I enjoy looking for unusual stories and teaching people about London's history, meeting people from different countries and walks of life. I just love doing tours. I think my tours help people see homelessness differently as I can tell people about my own experience. As my route is set along where I used to sleep rough, half of the tour focuses on that, and the other half is local history and interesting stories. Also I talk about homeless day centres and other things to do with homelessness.

Like Viv, any vulnerably housed Londoner can become a guide for Unseen Tours. In fact, many of the guides are recommended by other, already established, guides. When the pilot tours started in 2010, only three guides were involved. By 2018, the organisation was working with 20 guides. The areas that are being visited are the ones that the guides know best, and the content is based on facts and issues they are passionate about. Often guides have a location or route in mind which they would like to cover. While the guide is free to talk about their own experiences and stories, this does not mean that no training is provided.

   After an initial meeting to see whether the guide would be a good fit for Unseen Tours and vice versa (i.e. whether the organisation could usefully assist the individual), regular meetings take place between the guide and a buddy who explore the area together, usually once a week over a few months. Through the research that the guide undertakes and the conversations and walks they have with their volunteer buddy from Unseen Tours, ten to twelve major points of interest are selected for the main route of the tour. This makes the training rather informal, facilitated through volunteers and experienced guides. The tours are therefore co-constructed by guides and buddies alike, with the guides' own voices and interests taking priority, with Unseen Tours acting as a mentor and facilitator to draw out their ideas and strengths. Some of the volunteers have experience and backgrounds in acting and tour guiding, which is particularly useful if the guide needs help with the 'performance' element of tour guiding. In such cases, the volunteers support guides with additional coaching on public speaking, presentation, projection, and more. More experienced guides also help with this through informal meetings as the tours develop. Ultimately, the whole exercise is designed to boost the guides' confidence and help them realise their own potential, which is why Unseen Tours is offering this kind of support. The duration of this part of the mentoring process varies largely as it depends on the guides' own readiness, circumstances and reliability.

Once the guide is confident of the route and feels ready to launch, Unseen Tours schedules at least two dress rehearsals, inviting all the volunteers and other Unseen Tours guides so that everyone can get to know the new guide and route. Unseen Tours also gets in contact with the guide to see if they need anything, including new clothes, shoes or similar equipment and gets it for them before the launch of a new tour. The ticket sales help to pay for this.

In terms of a long-term vision for the guides' future, the social enterprise sees no one-size-fits-all solution. While some of the other social enterprises discussed above aim to get homeless people back into working life as quickly as possible, Unseen Tours works with each guide on an individual basis. It therefore prefers to find solutions tailored to individual needs. In addition to offering employment, Unseen Tours supports guides seeking new or better housing arrangements and those going through difficult periods. Some previous guides have gone on to different kinds of work after their tour guiding experience, both within and outside of the tourism sector.

As the above discussion shows, Unseen Tours has worked hard to empower their guides, such as, for example Viv, who says 'I love being a part of it. It gives me a purpose.' Besides empowering guides, the organisation also ensures that homeless people are not exploited or disrespected through their tours in a voyeuristic way. Unseen Tours' vision of social inclusion and positive change is highly commended by a range of sources (Bland 2015; Pati 2010; Trip Advisor), and the enterprise won the Responsible Tourism Award in 2011 as well as the travel category at the 2013 Observer Ethical Awards. However, others argue that the social enterprise facilitates poverty or slum tourism (Taylor 2011) by turning poverty into something that can be consumed by tourists. Therefore, it is worth analysing whether any real parallels exist between homeless tour guiding and slum tourism.

Homeless Tour Guiding in the Context of Slum and Poverty Tourism

Traditionally, slum tourism is known as a phenomenon mainly to be found in metropoles in developing or emerging countries, including Brazil, India and South Africa (Rolfes 2010). However, its origins can be traced back to Europe where 'slumming' was a popular leisure activity for the upper and middle class in London, who visited poorer quarters of the city at the end of the nineteenth century (Koven 2006). Today, slum tourism is an organised industry with increasing numbers of businesses offering slum tours in poorer quarters of the Global South (Meschkank 2011), particularly for the international tourist market (OBrien 2011). This kind of tourism has been subjected to strong criticisms for many years, in that it is often regarded as selling poverty and stimulating voyeuristic tourism, which is why it has also been referred to as 'poverty

tourism', 'human safaris', 'poorism' or 'negative sightseeing' (Freire-Medeiros 2013; Meschkank 2011).

Although a 'typical' slum tour is hard to define, people often think of them as being voyeuristic and exploitative, where visitors romanticise poverty in segregated, unfamiliar and inaccessible spaces. A range of researchers have investigated the motives that attract tourists to slums and the role that poverty plays (Rolfes 2010; Meschkank 2011; Burgold and Rolfes 2013). There is a general consensus that tourists embark on a slum tour to fulfill their desire to experience 'authentic' or 'real' aspects of the country they are visiting, which they hope to find in its poorest areas, such as slums, townships or favelas (Rolfes 2010; Meschkank 2011). Indeed, the search for authenticity while travelling is not new – after all, MacCannell (1999) argues that the tourist's main characteristic is the restless search to get beyond what is obviously presented in order to see the hidden and real destination (although failing to do so). The kind of 'authenticity' tourists often experience is staged culture performed in touristic spaces, rather than 'real' life in the destinations they visit (MacCannell 1999). One may argue that the reason for this ever-increasing search for authenticity is because we find ourselves in a highly globalised world, characterised by modernity and a loss of meaning and real human relationships (Bauman 2010).

'Off the beaten track' alternatives to mass tourism, such as ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) have emerged in response to tourists' desire to come closer to residents – in addition to the need to increase benefits for residents in destinations. As part of an earlier piece of research, one of the authors found that authenticity was a key selling point of the CBT produc but, most importantly, that it was related to the 'underdeveloped charm' of villages (Dolezal 2015a). In a study on edgy urban destinations in London, two of the other authors that appear in this book, Smith and Pappalepore (2015), discovered that authenticity for tourists often relates to more edgy areas in the city, which are 'chain free', characterised by ethnic diversity and where one can meet 'real Londoners'. Similar to these examples, in the context of slum tourism, tourists tend to connect the notion of authenticity directly with ideas of poverty – as demonstrated by Meschkank's (2011) observations on slum tourism in India:

> For the tourist [...] the real in the sense of authentic India is the poor India. Thus, a relationship can be identified between the degree of authenticity and the grade of poverty. That tourists look for authenticity off the beaten track is not new, nor is the notion that this authenticity increases with the grade of poverty. For at least as long as the Lonely Planet handbook—the traveller's bible, has marketed tours off the beaten track, these tours have gone to the poorer countries in the world. However, it is new that these tours go to slums (53).

Meschkank makes the argument that poverty has always stimulated interest amongst tourists, particularly when they themselves live in more industrialised nations than those they visit. However, the role that poverty plays in the touristic product becomes problematic when poverty turns into a commodity fetish, which is romanticised and traded for money (Frenzel 2013; Selinger 2009). Freire-Medeiros (2009) goes as far as speaking of the 'exchange value' of poverty in the sphere of tourism:

> [A]lthough under capitalism every single thing may be turned into a commodity, [Marx states that] there is one thing which can never be bought or sold: poverty, for it has no exchange value. The fact is that at the turn of the millennium, poverty has been framed as a product for consumption through tourism on a global scale (586).

If there is a danger of commodifying poverty as part of slum tourism (Frenzel 2013) or CBT (Dolezal 2015a), the question that emerges is whether homeless tour guiding uses a similar kind of attraction through the interaction with their tour guides? This raises a further question: if poverty is part of the appeal, what role can tourism really play in its alleviation? If poverty was the main attraction, this would mean that a lasting positive change for residents and destinations would at the same time destroy the very attraction that tourism depends on. Therefore, it is important to understand what really constitutes the attraction in different kinds of tourism. Slum tourism, poverty tourism and homeless tour guiding deserve closer analysis given the obvious role that poverty plays. Notably in the context of slum tourism, research has been conducted into the motivations of tourists, revealing that poverty often only forms the background context of the tours, with tourists primarily having an interest in residents' 'real' life, rather than poverty per se (Rolfes 2010). More importantly, the general meaning of poverty and the words associated with the slum were found to change after the tours and developed into more positive ones, including ideas of 'friendliness' and 'community' and an overall organised system in the slum (Dyson 2012; Meschkank 2011; Rolfes 2010). The tours therefore have the potential to relativise the idea of poverty and change tourists' preconceptions of poverty and poor urban areas (Monroe and Bishop, 2016).

   Frenzel (2012) points towards the power that slum tourism bears for change, by turning poverty into something of importance in the context of tourism:

> The transformation of the slum into something valuable fulfils another, moral, function for the tourist. If poverty is understood as a problem, gazing at it evokes the necessity to do something about it. Indeed, voyeurism means that poverty is simply consumed for entertainment with no regards for the poor; they are simple 'othered' as poor. However,

> if poverty can be seen as something valuable, touring it becomes a
> 'must-do' just like other valuable sights need to be 'seen'. Arguably this
> is what has happened in the most developed slum tourism destinations.
> 'Othering' is recast in a positive light: the poor are 'others', but they
> are good! Concurrently there is less need to do something about their
> poverty (59).

Hence, while the 'othering' of poor residents can lead to objectification
through voyeuristic encounters (Selinger 2009), it does not necessarily have to
be characterised by power inequalities (Dolezal 2015b), but instead can lead
to increased awareness about pressing issues (Frenzel 2013). Indeed, the ben-
efits that slum tourism generates for residents have been subject to a certain
amount of research (Dyson 2012; Freire-Medeiros 2012; Mekawy 2012), also
by NGOs (Monroe and Bishop, 2016). Tourism Concern, a UK-based NGO
working on tourism and human rights issues, emphasises a range of benefits,
such as socio-economic empowerment and pride in one's community and life
(Monroe and Bishop 2016) that such tourism can bring. However, there is a
need to better understand how residents are involved in slum tourism deci-
sion-making processes and what their position is (Frenzel and Koens 2012).
To date, little research has been conducted on residents' views of slum tour-
ism (Freire-Medeiros 2012), as is the case with many other kinds of tourism.
The success and benefits of slum tourism for local residents largely depend on
how tours are organised, i.e. in regard to representation but also economic and
political aspects (Dürr and Jaffe 2012). When managed and organised well,
some even talk about 'responsible slum tourism', which is in line with pro-poor
tourism's general aim of benefiting the poor and creating economic linkages
(Mekawy 2012).

   Questions that need to be asked in order to better understand opportuni-
ties for empowerment in tourism relate to where the economic benefit of tour-
ism goes, whether tourism supports wider community projects in the area or
benefits only individuals and in how far residents can represent themselves as
part of tourism (Dolezal 2015a). In regards to the latter, the role of the guide is
important here, in that they are mediators and cultural brokers, who interpret
and therefore shape reality for the tourists (Hallin and Dobers 2012; Salazar
2005). They endow space with meaning, depending on their stories and inter-
action with the space (Hallin and Dobers 2012). Through their narratives, they
can create attractions (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015) and can possibly, as is the
case with homeless tour guiding, become attractions themselves. At the same
time, if representation is in the hands of external guides rather than residents,
this 'can sometimes package poverty in exotified and romanticised ways, cre-
ating false tourist perceptions of real life in slums. This also takes away the
agency of people who actually live in these areas to present their own personal
narratives' (Monroe and Bishop 2016, 6) and, as a consequence, leads to their
disempowerment (Dolezal 2015a).

In this context, it is the political role of slum tourism and tour guiding in general, that deserves much more research attention. After all, as Hallin and Dobers (2012) state, 'the guided tour, regardless of its intention, is political in nature'(23). Frenzel (2014) even goes so far as to argue that slum tourism forms part of wider urban regeneration from below, given that it 'responds to an absence of action or perceived failure to respond to poverty by urban policy' (431). Tourism, thus, has the power to acknowledge communities marginalised by the government and put them back on the map (Frenzel 2014).

In the context of homeless tour guiding, the ideas above relate closely to the work of Unseen Tours, particularly in respect to guide's empowerment and the changing of social stigmas. The range of counter-arguments to the criticisms of slum or poverty tourism that already exist serves as a basis to develop our ideas on homeless tour guiding and its yet under-acknowledged role in urban regeneration and social change in the city.

Empowering Vulnerably Housed Londoners through Tourism

Homeless tour guiding is a more recent phenomenon than slum tourism, and little research has been conducted to date. Only a small number of authors have referred to homeless tour guiding projects in the context of wider research on social enterprises (Dredge 2017; Kraftova et al. 2015). However, so far, no in-depth analysis of the phenomenon itself, tourists' motivations or guides' views has beenconducted. In fact, much of the writing on Unseen Tours to date can be found in the media, such as the BBC (Jarosz 2012), the *Independent* (Taylor 2011), the *Telegraph* (Morris 2015) or the *Guardian* (Bland 2015). As stated earlier, opinions vary on the topic, with some authors criticising the idea of homeless tour guiding and others celebrating the social enterprise's successes in empowering guides and challenging stereotypes.

As a result of this lack of research, this chapter's final section is an attempt to bring together a range of key arguments that respond to some of the criticisms of homeless tour guiding, pointing towards the positive change it can bring. It does so by drawing on the relevant literature on slum tourism, tour guiding and empowerment and combining it with the personal reflections and experiences of the authors.

The Gaze is not Directed at the Exotic or Economically Poor

Homeless tour guiding has experienced criticisms in online newspapers and on travel websites for selling poverty as a commodity – evoking parallels with slum tourism and poorism (Kassam 2013; Taylor 2011). As discussed above, these kinds of tourism are often chastised for directing the tourist gaze onto the economically disadvantaged exotic, resulting in voyeurism and unequal power

relations between tourists and residents. While this may be the case in slum tours to a certain extent, Unseen Tours actively works to avoid to 'voyeuristically and superficially [point] out economically and "socially" deprived areas and the people within them' (Unseen Tours 2016, n.p.). Guides are empowered to share their own personal stories rather than pointing to and sharing those of others. Figure 7.3, for example, shows Mike on a tour in Camden, telling his own stories about the area as well as his own experiences of homelessness.

This does not mean that Unseen Tours ignores the differences in wealth that may exist between tourists and residents. As Dürr and Jaffe (2012) remind us, once tourism involves pronounced class differences between 'host' and 'guest', one needs to consider the ethical aspects of it. The 'othering' of guides may happen in a sense that guides are indeed different from the tourists due to their economic and living conditions. However, as a number of authors have shown elsewhere in the context of CBT and slum tourism (Dolezal 2015b; Frenzel 2013), the othering of residents can also create an awareness of difference, poverty and other social problems – ultimately leading to greater mutual understanding. The Unseen Tours guides' position of authority (as discussed below) tips the unequal power relations of tourism on its head, as the subjects of the tours become authoritative figures leading tourists around their areas. Thus, through Unseen Tours, the tourist gaze is redirected into different spheres, away from the obvious features of poverty and the traditional attractions in London, towards the unseen elements of the city and the realities of homelessness.

Figure 7.3: Mike on a Tour in Camden (Photo: Unseen Tours).

Poverty is not the Key Attraction in Homeless Tour Guiding

While the role that poverty plays in slum tourism is debatable, the discussed research has confirmed that a certain element of poverty, often disguised as 'authenticity' for tourists, forms part of the attraction. When it comes to homeless tour guiding, poverty in the form of the economic disadvantage that most homeless and vulnerably housed people experience undoubtedly plays a role; however, it is not an attraction in itself. Unseen Tours' intentions are to avoid exploiting guides for financial benefit, which is also why the organisation was established as a not-for-profit social enterprise. The customers of Unseen Tours do not come to see poverty in London – instead, they come to learn more about the city's past, local stories and see the city through the perspective of local experts. This does not mean that the guide is not an attraction him/herself: having a homeless tour guide is often a fascinating experience for visitors.

Considering the key role that tour guides play for tourists in interpreting and mediating spaces (Reisinger and Steiner 2006), one may argue that they don't just create attractions (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015) but can become an attraction in themselves. It is the knowledge and performative narrative of the guide that constitutes the attraction of the tours rather than the guide's vulnerable housing situation. Indeed, 'performance' is a key element of the tours – as is the case with tour guiding in general (Jonasson and Scherle 2012). The guide therefore assumes a double role – while becoming an interpreter/broker in the touristic context, their life is, at the same time, part of the content of the tour and the daily reality of the toured space.

Through training and coaching provided by volunteers, the guide has a chance to articulate his/her agency on this stage and can choose how best to present him/herself and the content of the tours. This gives him/her a certain power to decide on what s/he sells as attraction as part of the tours. It ensures that the power dynamics of this tourism system are not just one-sided (Cheong and Miller 2000), and the attraction itself is co-constructed in the touristic process, i.e. the tour itself. The empowerment of residents depends largely on what the attraction constitutes (Dolezal 2015a). Therefore, it is important to understand tourists' motivations to be part of the tours as well as the guides' role therein.

Homeless Tour Guiding does not Depend on Segregated City Environments or the Continuation of Homelessness

Slum tours usually lead tourists to deprived and poor areas of urban environments, but homeless tour guiding does not depend on visits to segregated areas. Besides less popular tourist areas, Unseen Tours' guides also work in established tourist areas, found on the 'typical' tourist trail, including Camden, London Bridge and Brick Lane. These are already familiar to many of the visitors on the

tours, which is why Unseen Tours shines a light on how, in many instances, situations of deprivation and social exclusion are hidden behind the 'glitzy' touristy facade. This means that the tourist gaze is redirected to a different sphere. Visitors are looking to learn more about the areas from a different perspective and, most importantly, from a local resident who is from the area, which makes touristy spaces more authentic in the eye of the visitor. (Frenzel and Blakeman 2015). However, this does not automatically mean that authenticity relates to poverty in this case – an aspect that deserves further exploration.

The way that Unseen Tours operates means that their guides do not need to remain homeless or vulnerably housed for them to remain a tour guide with the organisation. Though there has been criticism of poverty tourism projects in this regard, in which it has been argued that the poverty or deprivation which constitutes the subject of the tour is required to remain constant and unchanging for the tours to continue, this is not the case here. In fact, the Unseen Tours volunteers work with the tour guides to help them find temporary and permanent housing and provide continuous support through their buddy schemes. The volunteers are keen to emphasise that they would be happier if homelessness would cease to exist, and their continued employment does not rely on their housing status.

Homeless Tour Guiding Can Empower Guides

This chapter argues that homeless tours empower guides, giving them a platform and voice to tell their stories and paint a picture of the city from their own perspective. It is an opportunity to add alternative narratives to the dominant tourism discourses of the city, which tend to overlook social inequalities and poverty. Unseen Tours ensures that 60 per cent of their sales go directly to guides, and the remaining money is spent on training, marketing and other essentials, such as mobile phone tariffs and transportation for the guides. In contrast to other homeless tour guiding companies, Unseen Tours is entirely run by volunteers who support guides with coaching and training, which is another key aspect when it comes to empowerment in the context of tourism (Dolezal 2015b; Scheyvens 2003). Indeed, the tours are very much designed to elevate the guides to a position of authority where the customers pay to come to listen to them share their knowledge – rather than simply giving them money. Guides are thus in a position to undertake their own tours and receive feedback which can, in turn, have an impact on their overall self-confidence, their sense of belonging to the area and the city. For example, David, one of the guides working for Unseen Tours, commented that, 'I am now doing a job which I love, I tell people that I used to go to work because the government told me to, now I go to work because I enjoy it!' Working as an Unseen Tours Guide therefore gives guides a purpose and, ultimately, can also increase their ability to take up other work opportunities in the future: 'If I should ever leave Unseen

Tours I would get some qualifications and try to find more work as a tour guide or something similar. I would then have all three: qualifications, experience and skills. With those I should be able to get myself a job.'

From the very start, the main aim of Unseen Tours was that every aspect of the tours was co-constructed with the guides, empowering them to shape the narrative and how the tours would work. This is reflected in the tours themselves and in how they are set up. Every effort is also made to make Unseen Tours a structurally and hierarchically flat organisation. Although the social enterprise has Directors in a legal sense, everyone involved in Unseen Tours has a say as to how the organisation is run and how to drive it forward. It is the guides that have the most say in the organisation, and they are at the core of its daily operations. Kinder (2016) confirmed this in earlier exploratory research on homeless tour guiding, in which she found that Unseen Tours encourages a sense of ownership and participation as much as economic empowerment.

Homeless Tour Guiding Challenges Social Stigmas about Homelessness

A review of the literature on slum tourism has shown that tourists' views of poverty and slums often change after having participated in a slum tour (Dyson 2012; Meschkank 2011; Rolfes 2010). It is well-known that tour guiding carries a strong educational role; however, it was found that particularly more 'alternative tours' seek to educate on social issues and change (Byron 2012). Byron (2012) argues that these more alternative tour guides, which are not part of commercial organisations:

> are very engaged within their communities and often have an educational mission. Making people think of social topics such as diversity or heritage is important; this is why tours are often described as a 'crossover of work in socio-cultural education and tourism'. [...] [I]n contrast to official guides there is an additional motivation for tour guiding: they want to emancipate tourists, affect changes in tourists' personal lives and teach them to look beyond the alleged 'traditional tourist story' (34).

Problems of income polarisation and workers earning less than the London Living Wage often remain below the surface in elite-driven public discourse, creating stigmatisation rather than responses to poverty (DeVerteuil 2014). Homeless tour guiding can be a way of putting vulnerably housed Londoners 'back on the map' and giving them political power by being responsible for part of the tourism industry in the city. While the tours may not solve the problem of homelessness in London, they can help challenge the stereotypes associated with homeless people. Guides are empowered to showcase their unique experiences, knowledge, and skills and participate actively in the creation of value for incoming tourists.

Homeless Tour Guiding brings Wider Benefits for Urban Destinations

While no research has investigated the role of homeless tour guiding from a destination perspective to date, this must not be overlooked. Homeless tour guiding does not happen necessarily in the most popular tourist areas in London. Although some of the tours take tourists to familiar and popular tourist places and show these areas in alternative ways, they also cover peripheral areas that are increasingly interesting for tourists. They assist in dispersing tourists away from the traditional sightseeing paths between Big Ben and the South Bank, for instance, which can help overcome overcrowding and spread the economic benefits of tourism to different areas of London. The phenomenon of homeless tour guiding thus potentially contributes to the growth of tourism in more 'ordinary', edgy and impoverished urban neighbourhoods (Smith and Pappalepore 2015). As some of the tours bring tourists to more deprived areas of London they can serve as an 'urban development and regeneration tool from below' (Frenzel 2014, 431). At the same time, homeless tour guiding not only makes tourism more inclusive, but also offers a more experiential tourism product which uses storytelling and alternative narratives to satisfy the desires of the postmodern tourist (Byron 2012).

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have discussed the work of Unseen Tours and the phenomenon of homeless tour guiding more generally. The discussion outlined some of the criticisms that have been levelled at homeless tour guiding experiences, particularly when it comes to the commodification of poverty and the 'othering' of poor and vulnerably housed tour guides. While this criticism deserves further empirical investigation, this chapter argues that homeless tour guiding is driven by tourists' desire to learn about the 'real' and 'authentic' London. Homeless tour guiding takes tourists off the beaten track to discover novel attractions. Whilst authenticity is not necessarily related to notions of poverty, meaning that the authentic London is not necessarily the poor London (as is often the case with the areas visited in slum tourism), poverty does have a role to play as Unseen Tours' guides have had some experience of homelessness, vulnerable housing and economic disadvantage.

Therefore, while certain parallels with slum tourism may exist, the argument that homeless tour guiding is the new form of slum tourism or poorism seems difficult to justify. The locations where the tours take place (the attraction being educational rather than reinforcing the visual consumption of poverty) and the way the tours are organised (which enables the empowerment of tour guides) demonstrate how Unseen Tours remains outside the usual slum tourism definitions. The power to deliver social change has been at the heart of Unseen Tours' work from the very start and the analysis

offered in this chapter demonstrates that Unseen Tours can help to effect societal change in the city. Homeless tour guiding needs to be seen alongside other forms of social tourism in cities – which is an under-researched phenomenon. While a range of tourism initiatives with a social purpose do exist in London, little attention has been paid to the role these can play in societal change in the city. The Good Hotel London, for example, trains unemployed locals and stimulates local businesses by being strongly rooted in the local community (Good Hotel London 2018). Their social business concept thus shows strong parallels with Unseen Tours, going beyond the CSR agenda towards more sustainable social change in an urban context. Research to date has, however, not paid much attention to this in the context of London's tourism landscape.

Homeless tour guiding can be a way to create new livelihoods for marginalised members of society, thus making urban tourism more socially inclusive. In this chapter we have argued that homeless tour guiding can give residents political power and create an awareness of a marginalised group of British society. Care should be taken to make sure that social enterprises do not replace government responsibilities and actions. However, organisations like Unseen Tours do constitute a welcome addition to state support and the welfare system and can create more awareness of problems that are often overlooked in the traditional tourism narrative.

By bringing homeless tour guiding into the context of slum tourism and empowerment, this chapter offers one of the first contributions on this phenomenon. Though more research is needed on tourists' motivation to participate in these tours, the tour guides' narratives, how such tours can shape and change people's realities and challenge stereotypes, as well as the role of homeless tour guiding in urban regeneration, this chapter outlines some of the issues missing from existing studies. By understanding homeless tour guiding as a social and a spatial phenomenon which is commercialised for the tourist but designed to help the guide, we will be better able to understand social inequalities in the city and how these might be addressed.

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