

Architecture as a Tourism Resource: Iconic Buildings, Built Heritage and the Limits of Visitor Capacity

Farizabonu Khamzayeva

Annotatsiya

This article examines how architecture contributes to tourism, using a comparative reading of published case studies and official documentation. It distinguishes three roles that the built environment plays for visitors: a single building as the primary reason for travel, built heritage as a cultural and economic asset, and the ordinary urban fabric as the setting in which the visitor experience takes place. The evidence is drawn from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the Sydney Opera House, the historic cities of Uzbekistan inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and Shakhrisabz), and the pressures reported in Venice and Barcelona. The analysis suggests that iconic buildings produce lasting tourism benefits mainly when they are embedded in a wider urban programme; that built heritage keeps its value only while authenticity and the related craft skills are maintained; and that success itself generates risks of resident displacement and physical wear. The article argues that architecture should be managed as a long-lived asset under explicit visitor-capacity limits, and it outlines implications for emerging heritage destinations in Central Asia.

Kalit so'zlar architecture; tourism; built heritage; iconic buildings; Bilbao effect; Uzbekistan; overtourism

Introduction

Tourism is usually analysed through visitor numbers, expenditure and accommodation capacity. Yet what visitors photograph, remember and recommend is, to a large extent, built form: a skyline, a square, a façade, a courtyard. The Eiffel Tower, the Registan ensemble in Samarkand and the sails of the Sydney Opera House serve as shorthand for the places in which they stand, and they appear in destination marketing more often than almost any other feature of those places.

The relationship between architecture and tourism is nevertheless treated unevenly in the scholarly record. Tourism studies have tended to regard the built environment as a backdrop or as heritage to be conserved, while architectural scholarship has tended to regard tourists as an audience for design rather than as an economic and social force that acts on it. Several authors have called for the two perspectives to be read together (Lasansky & McLaren, 2004; Ockman & Frausto,

2005), but integrated comparative treatment remains limited, and Central Asian destinations, where heritage tourism is expanding quickly, are rarely included.

This article addresses that gap through three research questions:

In what ways does architecture function as a resource for tourism?

Under what conditions do architectural investments and heritage assets produce lasting benefits for destinations?

What risks does tourism create for the buildings and places on which it depends?

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the comparative case-study method. Section 4 presents the findings under four themes. Section 5 discusses implications and limitations, and Section 6 concludes.

Literature review

Architecture and the tourist gaze

Early sociological accounts located tourism in the search for sights. MacCannell (1976) described sightseeing as a ritual in which attractions are singled out and invested with meaning, and Urry (1990) argued that tourism is organised around the visual consumption of places, in which landscapes and townscapes are selected and framed as objects of the gaze. Built form fits this model unusually well: it is fixed, easily photographed and legible to visitors without specialist knowledge. Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990) developed the concept of the tourist-historic city, in which the historic urban fabric is at once a living city and a product consumed by visitors, so that it must serve several user groups with competing claims.

Iconic buildings and architourism

The edited volumes of Lasansky and McLaren (2004) and Ockman and Frausto (2005) established architecture as a subject within tourism research; the latter uses the term architourism for travel motivated by buildings and their settings. Jencks (2005) described the iconic building as one that condenses a complex identity into a memorable, often enigmatic image. Sklair (2006) linked iconic architecture to the strategies of cities and corporations competing for global attention, and argued that the production of icons is bound up with capitalist globalisation. Gospodini (2002) showed how European cities used distinctive new design to compete for investment and visitors. The best-known empirical case is Bilbao: Plaza (2000, 2006) assessed the contribution of the Guggenheim Museum to tourism and examined the return on the public investment made in it, and her work is routinely cited in discussions of the so-called Bilbao effect.

Heritage, authenticity and tourism

Research on heritage tourism stresses that built heritage is both a cultural and an economic resource (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Authenticity is central to the discussion. The Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994) holds that authenticity must be judged within its cultural context, taking into account form, materials, techniques and setting, rather than by a single universal standard. Work done to make monuments presentable to visitors therefore raises a practical question: how much intervention preserves the value on which an attraction depends, and how much replaces it?

Overtourism and limits

More recent work documents the strain that visitor growth places on historic cities and monuments. Dodds and Butler (2019) bring together case studies from several continents and discuss policy responses such as visitor caps, pricing and the dispersal of flows across time and space. The literature thus offers strong accounts of each theme taken separately (iconic buildings, heritage and overtourism) but few that connect them in one analytical frame. This article attempts such a connection.

Methodology

Research design

The study is a qualitative, comparative, multiple-case analysis (Yin, 2018) based exclusively on secondary sources. No visitor surveys, interviews or site measurements were carried out. The approach was chosen because the research questions concern patterns across different kinds of places rather than the magnitude of effects in one of them.

Case selection

Cases were selected against four criteria: (a) the case is documented in peer-reviewed literature or in official records; (b) together the cases cover the different roles that architecture plays in tourism; (c) they come from more than one region; and (d) at least some bear directly on Central Asia. On this basis the analysis uses the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and the Sydney Opera House as examples of buildings that are attractions in their own right; Eiffel's tower in Paris and the Sagrada Família in Barcelona as long-run examples of the same type; the historic cities of Uzbekistan on the World Heritage List (Khiva, Bukhara, Shakhrisyabz and Samarkand) as examples of built heritage; and Venice and Barcelona as examples of the pressures that tourism places on historic urban fabric.

Sources and analysis

Sources comprise scholarly books and articles, documentation and decisions of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and news reports by wire services and specialist press for recent policy measures and statistics that have not yet entered the academic literature. Each case was coded against three questions drawn from the research questions: what role the architecture plays, what conditions accompanied a beneficial outcome, and what risks were reported. The coded cases were then compared to identify recurring patterns.

Limitations of the method

Because the analysis rests on published material, it inherits the biases of that material, and the quantitative figures cited differ in provenance and reliability. News-derived figures are used only for recent policy facts and are attributed to their source. The findings should be read as an analytical synthesis and a set of propositions for further empirical testing, not as causal estimates.

Results

Iconic buildings succeed as part of wider programmes

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry and opened in 1997, is the reference case. According to Plaza (2000), it attracted visitors well above initial forecasts and became a recognised symbol of a city previously associated with industrial decline. The same studies make clear that the museum was one element in a

broader regeneration effort that also involved transport and waterfront improvements (Plaza, 2000, 2006). Cities that later commissioned signature buildings in the hope of repeating the result (Gospodini, 2002; Sklair, 2006) did not always find that a single structure was sufficient. The Sydney Opera House illustrates the cost side of ambition. The design by Jørn Utzon won an international competition in 1957 and the building opened in 1973, after a construction period marked by disputes and by a final cost many times the original estimate. It was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2007 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b). Eiffel's tower, built for the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle under a permit of limited duration, offers a similar lesson about delayed recognition: an object that was contested at the time of its construction later became the emblem of its city (Loyrette, 1985). The Sagrada Família, begun in 1882 and still unfinished, shows a different model, in which construction is itself part of the attraction and, according to the basilica's own account, is funded largely by donations and visitor tickets (Basílica de la Sagrada Família, n.d.). Built heritage retains value while it remains authenticThe historic centres of four Uzbek cities have been inscribed on the World Heritage List (Table 1). Each rests on a distinct group of buildings, and together they form the core of the country's cultural tourism offer.

City	Inscribed	Principal ensembles
Khiva (Itchan Kala)	1990	Walled inner town with mosques, madrasas and palaces
Bukhara	1993	Historic centre with minarets, mausoleums, trading domes and a citadel
Shakhrisyabz	2000	Timurid monuments, including the Ak-Saray palace begun in 1380
Samarkand	2001	Registan, Gur-Emir, Shah-i-Zinda, Bibi-Khanym Mosque, Ulugh Beg Observatory

Table 1. World Heritage inscriptions of historic cities in Uzbekistan. Sources: UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.-c, 2001).

Samarkand was inscribed in 2001 under criteria (i), (ii) and (iv), with the Committee describing its architecture and townscape as masterpieces of Islamic cultural creativity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2001). The Registan illustrates the point made in section 2.1 about legibility: its three madrasas, built in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, face one another across a single square, and the combination of symmetry, scale and tilework is readable at once by a visitor with no prior knowledge. The property has also been the subject of World Heritage Committee decisions on its state of conservation in many sessions between 2005 and 2025 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a), which indicates that conservation of a listed city is a continuing task and not a one-off project.

Two further points emerge. First, built heritage supports the survival of the crafts needed to maintain it, such as decorative tilework, carved wood and plasterwork, so that conservation spending can sustain living skills. Second, the question of authenticity discussed in the Nara Document (ICOMOS, 1994) applies directly. Where restoration makes a monument look uniformly new, the visitor's experience of age and continuity can be weakened, and, since that experience is what the attraction sells, the

loss is also an economic one. The study found no reliable quantitative data on this effect for the Uzbek cases, and it is therefore presented as a proposition and not as a finding.

The everyday built environment shapes the visit

Evidence on this theme is thinner, because most research concentrates on landmarks. The tourist-historic city concept (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990) suggests, however, that the visitor's experience depends on the ordinary fabric around the monuments: streets, courtyards, shade, wayfinding, places to rest, and the presence of residents and working shops. In hot climates such as that of Central Asia, traditional building types that provide shade and cooling, such as courtyards, thick walls and narrow streets, are also part of the comfort of the visit. Owner-operated guesthouses in historic courtyard houses are widely observed in Bukhara and Khiva, but this study did not locate systematic data on how far they contribute to the conservation of the buildings themselves. The point is recorded as a priority for field research.

Success generates its own risks

Venice shows what happens when visitor numbers outgrow the resident base. The population of the historic centre peaked at about 174,000 in 1951 and is now below 50,000 (Barry, 2025). In 2024 the city introduced a fee for day visitors on 29 selected days, and in 2025 it extended the scheme to 49 days with a fee of five to ten euros (Barry, 2025); by the 2026 season it applied on 60 days (AAP, 2026). Reporting on the first year, based on the city's own monitoring data, indicated that visitor numbers on the days when the fee applied were on average higher than on the same days of the previous year, and a tourism economist quoted in the same report concluded that the fee had had no impact on arrivals (The Art Newspaper, 2024). Pricing alone, in this case, did not reduce pressure.

Barcelona illustrates the housing dimension. In June 2024 the mayor announced that the city would not renew the 10,101 licences for tourist apartments when they expire in November 2028 (Faus, 2024). The measure is framed as a response to housing costs and to the quality of life of residents, not directly as a heritage policy, but it addresses the same underlying process: the replacement of residents by visitors in the historic city.

The physical wear of buildings under large numbers of visitors is widely recognised in the conservation literature (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Dodds & Butler, 2019), but quantitative data for the cases examined here were not available in the sources consulted.

Discussion

The three research questions can now be answered in turn, and the answers are summarised in Table 2.

Role of architecture	Conditions associated with lasting benefit	Main reported risk	Illustrative cases
Building as destination	Embedded in a wider urban programme; long time horizon	Cost overruns; copycat projects	Bilbao, Sydney
Built heritage	Authenticity; continued conservation and craft skills	Over-restoration; loss of authenticity	Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva

Everyday built environment	Comfortable, walkable, inhabited streets	Displacement of residents	Venice, Barcelona

Table 2. Roles of architecture in tourism, with enabling conditions and risks. Source: author's synthesis of the cases in section 4.

Regarding the first question, architecture functions as a tourism resource in three ways: as a single attraction, as a heritage asset and as the setting for the whole visit. The three interact. A landmark draws a visitor, but the visitor spends most of the trip in the surrounding streets, which is why the quality of ordinary fabric matters even to destinations that market a single monument.

Regarding the second question, the cases suggest that benefits last when the architectural asset is part of a plan and not a substitute for one. Bilbao is read in this way by the literature that analyses it most closely (Plaza, 2000, 2006), and the later difficulty of reproducing its result elsewhere is consistent with that reading. For heritage the corresponding condition is authenticity and the continued availability of the skills needed for maintenance. For a destination whose attraction is largely historic, conservation quality is therefore part of the marketing strategy, not a separate budget line.

Regarding the third question, the main risks are displacement of residents, physical wear and loss of authenticity. The Venetian experience indicates that price instruments alone may not reduce numbers. Barcelona's decision indicates that attention is moving from visitor flows to the housing stock. For emerging heritage destinations in Central Asia, the practical implication is that limits, monitoring and resident-oriented policies are cheaper to introduce before pressure becomes acute than after.

Limitations and further research

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, by the uneven quality of the quantitative information available, and by the number of cases. Two areas deserve empirical work: the effect of restoration practice on visitor perception of authenticity in Uzbek historic cities, and the contribution of small-scale accommodation in historic houses to the financing of conservation. Both could be examined through visitor surveys and building-level records.

Conclusion

Architecture contributes to tourism as an attraction, as heritage and as the setting of the visit, and the three roles reinforce one another. The comparative evidence reviewed here suggests that iconic buildings deliver lasting benefits when they are part of a wider urban programme, that heritage keeps its economic value only while it remains authentic and maintained, and that the success of a destination creates pressures on residents and on the buildings themselves that require explicit limits.

For destinations in Central Asia, where historic cities already attract growing numbers of visitors, the main recommendation is to manage architecture as a long-lived asset: to invest in conservation quality and craft skills, to monitor visitor pressure early, and to treat the resident population as part of the product. Further field research on authenticity and on small-scale accommodation in historic houses would allow these propositions to be tested directly.

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