Citing Sydney: Architectural Representation, Mapping, and the Tourist Gaze

Abstract

The expression ‘to put something on the map’ is a common enough metaphor, even a cliché. But perhaps it still has something to say about the tourist experience of architecture within a larger urban context. Tourist visual media very often prescribes a very specific route and order of things to see and do in a city – with its suggested itineraries and ‘must see’ lists, it navigates the tourist through a highly circumscribed and choreographed series of experiences. Tourists enact or perform the tourist map as they move through the city, and likewise the guidebook or itinerary can be seen as a kind of choreographic notation or ‘score’ for the tourist’s performance. But different tourists seek different aspects of the city, and tourist destinations are always contested terrains, written and overwitten by the varying symbolic and semantic needs of their visitors. This complex process of envisioning and revisioning is nowhere more evident than in tourist media, particularly tourist maps. This paper will examine a series of tourist maps, of Sydney and a range of other international cities, noting their visual codes, and their modes of representing urban space and architectural ‘landmarks’ within a city. Tourist maps differ from other types of map because certain architectural features are often ‘popped up’ from the flat plane of the city plan, and represented in three dimensions. The tourist map reveals these buildings as objects, as ‘sights’ that can be recognised when they are encountered in the experience of the city. Arguing that such tourist maps are highly revealing documents, the paper will open questions about how they ‘curate’ the tourist experience of the city of Sydney.

Introduction

The history and tradition of tourist media is a long one, and spread throughout the world – one might think of centuries of tourist representations produced for young nobles undertaking the ‘Grand Tour’ in Europe, and the even longer history of guided tours for religious pilgrims at various international sites, to name just two examples. But in this paper I will be concerned primarily with contemporary material, and in particular with a selection of tourist maps, both
commercially available and given out for free, produced both by the State tourist bureau and by private tourism providers. This paper represents the early stages of a larger project focusing on the city of Sydney, exploring representations of architecture in tourist visual media, and the related question of architectural tourism.

Architectural tourism, it could be argued, is central to an understanding of tourist practices more generally - tourism provokes an audience for architecture, it reframes buildings and urban space as sights. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, architecture is an art usually apprehended in a state of distraction – in the course of everyday life it tends to sink beneath notice, to become a taken-for-granted platform for the pleasures and banalities of the everyday.¹ This relationship is however inverted for the tourist, where novelty makes all things fresh and visually conspicuous. Individuals who might never give architecture a second thought in their usual environment are drawn to look at buildings in a strange city, to take guided tours, to examine architecture as part of urban and national identity, and to look upon buildings as emblems of social history. Architecture is also central to modes of tourist navigation – buildings become landmarks, monuments, and points of orientation.

Chris Rojek defines a tourist sight as “a spatial location which is distinguished from everyday life by virtue of its natural, historical, or cultural extraordinariness” and to be ‘put on the map’ is to become significant, to enter public consciousness, to be marked out and located in discourse as much as in public space.² More than this, to be ‘put on the map’ is to become a destination, to be located on a tourist itinerary, to be marked out as one landmark amongst the many which make up a city’s fabric. As Rojek and John Urry have noted, “Tourists are semioticians… Indeed it is sometimes claimed that the sign or marker is constitutive of the sight which, in a sense, cannot be ‘seen’ without the marker.”³ The point here is that it is not only landmark buildings that constitute such ‘markers’, but tourist maps as well. These are significant for their role in making a building or monument literally into a ‘sight’ – something that can be recognised when it is visually encountered in the real space and time of the city.

Others have already observed the value of tourist maps as objects of study, in particular Stephen P Hanna and Vincent J. Del Casino Jr, who write that

   tourism maps… are key sites through which we can construct a critical study of the relationships among space, identity, and representation. The relationships that emerge from the interrogation of tourism maps provide insights into how
tourism is not only represented but also practiced by tourists, tourism workers, the state, global capital, and other social actors. It is this emphasis on practice – on the tourist experience as itself a mode of mapping, whereby the tourist invents or enacts the city as they move through it – that places tourist maps at the centre of current theoretical concerns in cartography and architecture.

‘Lost’, or, who needs a map, or, the tourist has an image problem

The British photographer Stephen Gill has observed, in relation to his social documentary series entitled ‘Lost’, that

In a strange city or unfamiliar part of town, people often behave in a curiously furtive manner when resorting to maps and guidebooks. They may turn towards a wall or move close to a nearby lamppost or bin, to minimise obstruction and conceal the fact that they are lost. Their most vulnerable point comes when they try to match the map’s contours with actual surroundings, sometimes turning their whole body to assist with orientation. This phase usually lasts around 30 seconds. If their efforts are to no avail, they may try to make eye contact with passers-by, their facial expressions overtly signalling lostness in order to solicit help.

Gill’s work provides a useful orientation point for this paper, since he is concerned not only with maps, but with the behavioral performance that accompanies their use, and most particularly with the vulnerability that accompanies the need to consult one. This vulnerability is a function of the discrepancy or gap between the city itself and its cartographic representation – the attempt to ‘match the map’s contours with actual surroundings’. Denis Cosgrove notes that “[u]rban experience in a new city is often a process of negotiating the divergence between cartographic and material spaces.” But if it is also true that “[p]ractically, confrontation with an unfamiliar city is typically mediated by the map: of transit routes, of streets, of tourist destinations,” then why is there such a sheepishness about being seen to use a map? To publically consult a map is to announce that you don’t know where you are, or that you don’t know how to get to where you want to go. It announces a lack, which it publicises in the very act of attempting to address it. It also works to possibly identify the map-reader as a tourist, or align him or her with tourists. And this, as we shall see, is not always a desirable association.
In recent years, as the literature on critical tourism studies has burgeoned, the pressure has somewhat eased on individuals to justify their specific scholarly endeavours. Nevertheless there is still a well-established convention in writing about tourism, that one begins with a discussion of how much hated and maligned is the figure of the tourist, though also how central they are to any understanding of contemporary culture. Jody Berland succinctly notes that “[l]ike everyone, I have travelled, and like everyone, I hate tourists”, while David Vanderburgh and Hilde Heynen write that “[t]he tourist is an unenviable figure: ugly, inauthentic, desperately out of such.” Others have delved further into the reasons and arguments behind what is indeed a remarkably widely-held prejudice against tourists in general, and certain types of tourist – namely sightseers – in particular. The class-based aspects of this are well articulated by Lucy Lippard, who has noted that “[c]lassist distinctions are conventionally made between travel and tourism.” She continues,

Popular wisdom has it that educated middle-class travellers, more aristocratic and superior, pursue the distant and unexpected, gaining insights as they ply their graceful and god-given way across others’ terrains; while common tourists, travelling in bulk on packaged tours, just gawk, go too fast to see, and are more interested in taking pictures than living the moment.

In answer to the rhetorical question of ‘who needs a map’, then, it would seem that ‘travellers’ need maps more than ‘tourists’ and especially ‘sightseers’, who contract out their orientation and transport needs, being driven or walked from one place to another by a guide. For the traveler, then, one might expect the ownership and use of a map to be something of a badge of honour – implying autonomy and self-direction, the individual’s control over their own movements in space and time. But as we have already seen, the reality is somewhat more ambivalent than that. Lippard’s words reveal the complex way in which the scopic regimes of travel and tourism, at the intersection of vision, photography, and the ‘collection’ of sights, are also crossed by social concerns, moral judgements around ‘proper’ modes of experience, and questions of taste. More than this, it is the one who gawks, the rubbernecking lollygagger, who seems to be the scapegoat here. As Carol Crawshaw and John Urry have noted, despite the actual popularity of sightseeing as a mode of tourism, “[t]he experience is generally taken to be irreducibly superficial, both because it involves the sense of sight and because the tourist follows well-trodden routes leading to very familiar viewing points.” This builds upon Urry’s earlier, seminal work on the mutual imbrication of tourism and visuality in *The Tourist Gaze*. As he famously wrote there,
Much tourism involves a hermeneutic circle. What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photographic images, which have already been seen in tour company brochures or on TV programmes. While the tourist is away, this then moves on to a tracking down and capturing of those images for oneself. And it ends up with travellers demonstrating that they really have been there by showing their version of the images that they had seen before they set off.\(^1\)

It is in the practice of ‘tracking down and capturing those images for oneself’ that the tourist map enters into this cycle, and it does so in a particular and significant way.

**The representation of architecture in tourist maps**

One of the significant things distinguishing tourist maps from other maps – for instance street directories or conventional street maps – is that tourist maps are not solely planimetric. As John Macarthur has noted, following Louis Marin, it has historically been uncommon for monuments and landmarks to be represented on maps as three-dimensional artefacts, ‘popping up’ from the flat cadastral plane of a city plan.\(^2\) The mode of representation varies in this - from aerial perspective views, to axonometrics, to elevations. Meanwhile, some buildings are represented in plan, some as a roof plan, some as a footprint, some as an undistinguished block. These ‘footprinted’ buildings are invariably distinguished and marked out from the general arrangement of streets, train stations, hotels, post offices, and information points which are commonly represented with graphic symbols.

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**Figure 1.** Detail of tourist map of Brussels, showing significant buildings ‘popped up’ in axonometric projection. (Map in collection of the author.) **Figure 2.** Detail of tourist map of Florence. (Map in collection of the author.)
The most common technique is for the building to be extruded axonometrically upward from its true ‘footprint’, and thereby show accurate elevations, as in the details of Brussels and Florence shown in figures 1 and 2. Even in a map that strives for a more ‘hand-drawn’ aesthetic, as in the figure 3 detail of a walking map of Rotterdam, the projection of the building is still ‘correct’ according to both architectural and cartographic convention. This begins to break down in maps such as figure 4, a detail from a tourist map of Tokyo complete with a family of waving locals, with featured buildings shown in both elevation and perspective, and at different sizes according to their significance as tourist destinations. Interestingly, this map also features gardens represented in this way, which is unusual amongst tourist maps.

Figure 3. Detail of a tourist walking-map of Rotterdam. (Map in collection of the author.) Figure 4. Detail of tourist map of Tokyo. (Map in collection of the author.)

But while the Tokyo map may seem to have abandoned all pretence of accuracy or cartographic convention in its pursuit of a joyful and cartoonish aesthetic, there are even more extreme examples. The map of Venice in figures 5 and 6, for instance, shows significant bridges, palazzo, churches and other landmarks of the city in aerial perspective, but rather than orienting them towards the viewer as is more common, and as we see in the Tokyo example, the cartographer has undertaken a mighty struggle to orient the buildings towards the Grand Canal.
If this ‘longitudinal’ examination of international examples reveals how built landmarks are represented in a range of ways, it is worthwhile to also undertake a preliminary ‘latitudinal’ survey, and examine how the same city is represented in a range of maps. The city under examination here is Sydney, which with the relative age of the Sydney Opera House within the current mania for tourist-attracting ‘signature’ architecture, provides a useful case study.

**Other tourists, other maps, other Sydneys**

According to Morgan Sant and Gordon Waitt, tourism advertising has represented Sydney as a symbol of civilisation from which tourists can conveniently travel to a coastal paradise or explore the mystical and primitive frontier of the outback. Within these representations of Sydney only familiar Australian icons in popular culture are shown, such as the Opera House, Harbour Bridge, and CBD. The urban sprawl beyond the centre is totally excluded. Indeed, it would appear from the visual text of these advertisements that the CBD itself is bounded by bushland. Suburbia is ignored for the obvious reason that contains neither surprise nor spectacle. Different tourist maps figure these ‘familiar Australian icons’ in the inner city of Sydney quite distinctly.
In the ‘Sydney and Surrounds Free Map Guide’ (figure 7), a hierarchy is established, whereby the bridge and Sydney Tower are shown in aerial perspective, the Opera House and other tourist attractions are shown as shaded roof plans, and major civic buildings are dark grey blocks. Everything else, between the white streets, is a uniform pale grey. The ‘Sydney Metro Map’ (figure 8) unusually, shows only a schematised planimetric view of all architectural landmarks in Sydney, including the bridge, but gives detailed footprints of only a few key buildings.
The ‘Sydney’s Top Attractions’ map (figure 9), which is given away free in hotels and evidently associated with the Captain Cook Cruises group (as is evident on the map – the departure point for the cruises is clearly marked at Circular Quay), shows the Bridge, Opera House and Sydney Tower in aerial perspective, but receding to different vanishing points. Curiously, the commercially available ‘Streetsmart Sydney’ map (figure 10) shows a number of buildings in axonometric view with shadows, including the ANA building and the Gateway Plaza Building, with the reason for their being singled out remaining unclear.

Finally, and in a fascinating development, there are now commercially available maps such as figure 11, which are derived directly from aerial photography of the kind now familiar through technologies such as Google Earth. These photographs are visually smoothed and enhanced, stitched together, and overlaid with the text and symbols, paths, and attractions that are the staples of tourist maps. While one might say that this was an unsurprising development in light of the popularity of Google Earth as a mapping and visualization technology, it is perhaps also a more significant development in tourist maps, since it collapses the level of abstraction provided by planimetric drawings, providing an annotated, photographic, birds-eye view of the city which is very unlike the tourist maps of times past. But these maps are also particularly interesting because of the distortions that they introduce – this is in fact a view that no bird could ever see, since it is produced by the joining together of several different images, each taken from a slightly different aerial viewpoint. This is necessary to minimize the angle of recession of objects at a distance from the camera in aerial perspective, and to make a blanket coverage of a large area in the manner that a tourist map demands. But it also causes bizarre distortions, for instance the detail in figure 11 shows the ‘Four Points Darling Harbour’ building at the top left of the image receding to a dramatically different vanishing point to the two buildings to its right, even though the two constituent photographs have been seamlessly joined together.
Critical cartography and the lies of maps

It is now a commonplace assertion that maps are not neutral artefacts. They direct and persuade, they advertise and cajole. They are selective in what they include and exclude, what they de-emphasise or call attention to. They provide information, but this information is highly mediated, abstracted, and partial; it is a version of the city, rather than a definitive and true statement of facts. In recent years, the discourse of cultural geography has contributed a number of significant critical works on maps and mapping, including works on the history of cartography, maps as visual systems of representation and modes of graphic design, and the specific issues and problems of urban cartography. There have also been specific works on the history of the city of Sydney as read through maps. A number of texts have examined maps as emblems of authority, power, and possible misinformation, including Denis Wood’s *The Power of Maps* and Mark Monmonier’s seminal *How to Lie with Maps*.  

Monmonier explores “the wide variety of ways maps can lie: why maps usually must tell some white lies, how maps can be exploited to tell manipulative lies, and why maps often distort the truth when a well-intentioned map author fails to understand cartographic generalization and graphic principles”, while John Pickles writes that “the myth of the dispassionate neutrality of the map hides the socially constructed nature of the image. In this view... the map is the ‘mirror of nature’ in which the real is represented transparently as objective, neutral, and accurate.” These arguments are well in keeping with a more broadly postmodern ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, of which maps have become a principal
target, along with museum representations, History (with a capital H), and other previously unassailable sources of authoritative knowledge. The postmodern turn to heterogenous, multiplicitous processes over singular, universal products is perhaps also one explanation from a shift away from the primacy of the map and towards the act of mapping.

There is a current mania in the discourse and practice of critical cartography, urban studies, and architecture itself for mapping: “[i]f a map is a completed document, mapping refers to a process – ongoing, incomplete and of indeterminate, mutable form. Mapping… benefits from the lack of finality denoted by the word map.”

Now my argument here is that both of these related movements – the critical or deconstructive turn in cartography, and the shift in emphasis from maps and to mapping, are both manifest in a particularly provocative way in tourist maps. No one would ever expect a tourist map to be entirely comprehensive or objective, entirely ‘truthful’ or unbiased. The tourist map neither aspires to nor claims such universality – implicit in the tourist map is the idea of an edited view, that it does not show ‘all’ of the possible places or routes, but only the ‘best’ or ‘most interesting’ ones, as defined by tourist operators with clearly and explicitly vested interests. Tourist maps tell us much about how people anticipate or imagine tourist experience, and how that experience can be manipulated or recast by different representations. Tourist representations are commercial, and thoroughly inculcated in cycles of capitalist exchange. They construct identity and the promise of authenticity. They package, commodify and ‘sell’ the city through their representations of it; they prepare the city for consumption.

Tourist maps provide a valuable case of a knowingly and acceptedly subjective map – if it is true that “[m]aps simplify the world somewhat in the way a heavy snowfall does”, then a tourist map shows the world after a particularly heavy fall – highly abstracted, simplified, with all of the extraneous detail of the lived city blanketed over. In tourist maps it makes no sense to work at revealing inaccuracies, omissions, or ‘lies’, since that is the very stuff of which such maps are made. What is far more revealing is to understand what exactly is at stake in their partiality.
As Dean MacCannell (amongst others) has shown, questions of authenticity are central to the tourist experience.\textsuperscript{24} But the very fact that the tourist seeks the authentic place implicitly confirms that there are many other possible versions of that place. Multiple versions of the city might co-exist, contradict one another, or vie for supremacy, and this is nowhere more evident than in the separate maps produced to minister to specific audiences. Stereotype would have us believe that backpackers are interested in beaches and bars, Japanese tourists are interested in opals and koalas, cultural tourists are interested in museums and fine dining, and so on. Leaving aside the reductive character of such clichés, the point is still made: distinct tourists come looking for different aspects of Sydney, and tourist representations cater quite specifically to these different audiences. An example of this, is demonstrated in the juxtaposition of figures 12 and 13, in the way that the same section of Darlinghurst are figured differently in a generalist map and guide, and in a gay traveller’s guide. The generalist map (figure 13) notes some hotels, a post office, and a police station as the only points of interest, while the ‘Gaymap’ (figure 12) offers a taxonomy of different types of gay-friendly or gay-interest venue of interest to its audience, categorised by colour to denote hotels, food venues, nightclubs, bars, and saunas.

The subjective re-mapping and re-envisioning of the city embodied in this kind of juxtaposition produces a fascinatingly encoded series of representations, and it is the multiplicity and specificity of these other versions of Sydney, other maps, other images, other
experiences, that tourist visual media can reveal. If all of the tourist maps of Sydney were overlaid, some parts (Circular Quay and the Opera House precinct, for example) would be written and over-written in a dense palimpsest, whereas other areas would be sketched only lightly, and still others would be revealed as voids with few or no tourist ‘drawcards’ at all.

A tourist map can be read as a curious hybrid, perhaps closer to an itinerary or ‘must-see’ list than the flat, uninflected pretence to universality of other kinds of map. Robert Harbison has written that like maps, “itineraries impose an illusion of uniformity on loose extent and duration, by attempting to live out a map, bringing the map to life and putting the a life to bed in the map.”

It is the tourist map that choreographs and directs the tourist ‘performance’, and that serves to ‘curate’ the city as a kind of museum of spectacles and sights.

Endnotes


