



Rethinking Yerevan's touristic landscape through social and symbolic spaces

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ABSTRACT

Urban spaces are complex environments shaped by diverse perspectives and representations. This study explores the relationship between language and space in Yerevan, aiming to enhance our understanding of the city's dynamics. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Victor Vakhshayn, Henri Lefebvre, Kevin Lynch, Edward Glaeser, and David Seamon, the research examines how Yerevan is represented by tourists. Through thematic interviews with tour guides, analysis of tourist information leaflets, and document studies of “Inside Yerevan” maps, the study uncovers two primary challenges: geographical limitation and one-dimensional representation. To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach is proposed, including diversifying tour routes, integrating social and symbolic spaces in tour narratives, and promoting authentic local experiences. The “Inside Yerevan” map offers a promising solution by highlighting local favorites and lesser-known gems. Ultimately, by embracing diversity and authenticity, Yerevan can create a more sustainable tourism model that benefits both visitors and residents.

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Introduction

The city, characterized by its vastness, density, and heterogeneity (Karp et al., 2015, p. 96), presents a broad field of research for the study of urban spaces. This allows for the selection of specific viewpoints from which to observe the city, enabling a comprehensive understanding of any chosen urban phenomena through analysis. The evolution of perceptions surrounding urban phenomena at different stages of societal development is particularly intriguing. While the 19th and 20th centuries primarily regarded the city as a dynamic engine of growth, the 21st century is gradually reshaping this perception, shifting the emphasis towards the city as a stage – a space not solely for production but also leisure, pleasure, and fulfillment (Zukin, 1993). Consequently, the exploration of the city as a physical, social, and/or symbolic space is contingent upon the research perspective adopted and the descriptive language employed (Lefebvre, 1991; Schmidt & Németh, 2010).

It is important to acknowledge that language, in this context, is not merely a collection of words but rather a reflection of the thoughts, perceptions, and spatial arrangements of urban planners, city managers, developers, and consumers of urban space (Hillier & Hanson, 1989). This distinction gives rise to a divergence of perspectives between sociologists and geographers in the study of the language-space relationship (Soja, 1989). Proponents of the primacy of space contend that language merely serves as a distorted mirror, reflecting the tangible realities of the urban environment. Conversely, proponents of language argue that without an appropriate approach and expressive language, space would devolve into mere materialized phantoms, devoid of meaningful interpretation (Crag & Thrift, 2000).

Based on the aforementioned approach, it appears we have a set X representing the city's elements and a set Y comprising the languages that can be employed to describe it. The question then arises: what theoretical inquiries will enable us to uncover the connections and relationships between these two sets? The dynamic shifts when cities (X) and languages (Y) are considered in conjunction with a set of concepts (C) that facilitate the expression of their interrelations (Vakhshtayn, 2014, p. 21).

However, urban studies tend to examine the city predominantly from a one-sided perspective: evaluating its suitability for production or, in more recent times, for workers (Harvey, 1987). Often, it is also viewed as a settlement, primarily focusing on the study of population employment levels and distribution densities. Surprisingly, the city is seldom regarded as a space of modern consumption (Glaeser et al., 2000, p. 2).

While urban planning and architecture in Yerevan have traditionally focused on the physical space of the city, neglecting the public sphere, recent urban research has begun to highlight social spaces and transformations (Petrosyan, 2016, pp. 2-4).

However, it must be emphasized that research exploring modern urban space cannot be confined to the study of physical or social spaces alone. Instead, a comprehensive approach is necessary to present a holistic understanding.

Tourism, as a flexible and multifaceted phenomenon, serves as a prime example for describing and presenting the city through diverse languages. Urban tourism (Ashworth & Page, 2011), which developed during the 1990s, coincided with the rise of globalization and increased competition among cities. This prompted public actors to view the city as a commodity, seeking to better position themselves in the competitive market. Consequently, they emphasized the unique characteristics of the city, particularly its urban identity, by

fostering connections between the human community and the urban environment (Ashworth & Page, 2011).

To stand out among competing areas, the city must create a “unique selling proposition” (USP) (Reeves, 2017), that is, provide a package of advantages that competitors do not have, and apply methods of demand activation. To solve such problems, the image of the city is formed as a certain set of values, thanks to which the object (city) becomes known, and with the help of which people describe the object in a certain way, remember, and form their attitude towards it (Lynch, 1964).

The formation of a city's image is a complex interplay of objective characteristics and subjective perceptions (Kavaratzis, 2004). Objective factors encompass tangible aspects such as geographical location, history, culture, social policies, infrastructure, and economic indicators, reflecting the city's material reality (Zenker et al., 2017). Subjective factors, on the other hand, delve into the realm of perception, encompassing individual experiences, beliefs, and attitudes toward the city, as well as external influences such as media representations and word-of-mouth communication (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). These subjective perceptions are shaped by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social interactions, contributing to a multifaceted and dynamic understanding of the city's image (Boisen et al., 2011).

In this sense, tour guides, acting as mediators between the city and its visitors, play a crucial role in shaping the city's image. Tourists perceive, interpret, and experience the urban space through the lens of the tour guide's narratives and presentations (Cohen, 2013). This phenomenon is evident in various forms of city tours, including those offered by individual guides, tour companies, and the municipality's open-air bus tours.

Given the rapid growth of tourism in Armenia and its significance to the country's economy, it is crucial to investigate how tour guides present the urban space of Yerevan. Understanding their narratives and interpretations can shed light on the city's image as perceived by visitors and contribute to the development of more effective tourism strategies.

Although the Armenian government has identified tourism as a crucial economic sector and is actively promoting the country as a desirable tourist destination, the current presentation of Yerevan in guided tours often falls short of capturing the city's full essence. By primarily focusing on the physical attributes and neglecting the vibrant public sphere and lived experiences of its inhabitants, tour guides inadvertently present a one-dimensional image of Yerevan. This limited perspective not only hinders the development of a comprehensive understanding of the city but also fails to align with the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasizes the importance of cultural exchange, social interaction, and authentic experiences. A more holistic approach to showcasing Yerevan's urban landscape, encompassing both its tangible and intangible assets, would not only enrich the visitor experience but also contribute to a more sustainable and equitable tourism model for the city.

This research investigates the existing problems in the tourist presentations of Yerevan that could negatively impact the city's image. The study focused on city tours led by local tour guides and information leaflets representing Yerevan.

Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in a multi-faceted theoretical framework that draws upon key concepts from urban studies, sociology, and cultural geography.

Victor Vakhshayn's theory on the relationship between language and space serves as a foundational concept. It emphasizes the crucial role of language in shaping our understanding and perception of urban environments (Vakhshayn, 2014). Different languages, whether verbal, visual, or symbolic, can evoke distinct interpretations and experiences of the same physical space. This highlights the importance of considering how different narratives and representations shape the image of Yerevan for both residents and tourists.

Henri Lefebvre's (Lefebvre, 1991) theory of the production of space and urban revolution further expands this understanding by differentiating between physical, social, and symbolic spaces within the city. Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral backdrop but a socially produced entity, imbued with meaning and shaped by power relations (Lefebvre, 1991). This framework allows us to analyze how Yerevan's physical landscape, social interactions, and symbolic representations intersect and influence its overall image.

Kevin Lynch's concept of the image of the city (Lynch, 1964) complements Lefebvre's theory by focusing on the mental maps that individuals create of their urban environment. These mental maps, shaped by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social interactions, influence how people perceive, navigate, and interact with the city (Lynch, 1964). Understanding the image of Yerevan held by both residents and tourists is crucial for developing effective tourism strategies and promoting a more authentic and holistic representation of the city.

In addition to these foundational theories, Edward Glaeser's (Glaeser, 2012) work on the "Triumph of the City" emphasizes the unique characteristics that make urban environments attractive and successful. Glaeser identifies four key characteristics that distinguish urban areas:

1. **Diversity of Services and Amenities:** Urban areas are typically characterized by a wide array of services and consumer goods, including restaurants, theaters, shops, and other public attractions that cater to diverse interests and needs.
2. **Aesthetics and Physical Location:** While aesthetic preferences are subjective, there is a general consensus on certain qualities that contribute to an aesthetically pleasing urban environment. Factors such as architectural style, green spaces, and the overall layout of the city contribute to its visual appeal and desirability.
3. **Quality Public Services:** Efficient and accessible public services are essential for a well-functioning urban environment. This includes reliable public transportation, well-maintained street furniture, effective waste management, and other amenities that enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.
4. **Movement and Speed:** Cities are dynamic spaces characterized by constant movement and activity. The pace of life is often faster in urban areas, with a greater emphasis on efficiency and productivity. This is reflected in the transportation networks, pedestrian flows, and the overall rhythm of urban life.

These characteristics are particularly relevant to the study of Yerevan, as they highlight the factors that contribute to the city center's appeal and the potential challenges faced by areas outside the center.

The concentration of diverse services and amenities in the city center, as described by Glaeser, creates a convenient and attractive environment for both residents and tourists. This aligns with the findings of this research, which show that the city center is the primary focus of most tourist activities. However, the relative lack of these

characteristics in other parts of Yerevan may contribute to the uneven distribution of tourism and the perception of these areas as less desirable.

Finally, the works of David Seamon on place identity and phenomenology (Seamon, 2012), along with those of Harutyun Vermishyan on place and identity (Vermishyan et al., 2015), highlight the deep connection between people and their places. Seamon, drawing upon J. Bennett's systemic approach, proposed a framework that simplifies the intricate relationship between people and places into three core concepts, conceptualizing it as a tripartite relationship encompassing the geographical community, local people, and local spirit.

This framework aligns with broader theoretical approaches to understanding urban places, which can be distilled into three interconnected dimensions (Seamon, 2012):

1. The geographical/physical environment of the city: This includes both the natural landscape and the built environment, shaping the physical context for human activity and meaning-making.
2. Urban local agents: This encompasses residents, city administrators, visitors, and other stakeholders who interact with the urban environment, imbuing it with symbolic meanings through their actions, interpretations, and identities.
3. Local symbolic meanings of urban space: These meanings, rooted in individual and collective experiences, histories, and cultural practices, contribute to the unique identity of a place and its significance for those who inhabit or visit it.

All attempts to compartmentalize these dimensions prove futile, as urban space is fundamentally a complex whole. The city is inherently heterogeneous, a heterotopia encompassing diverse spaces. To understand the city or any phenomenon occurring within it, one must embrace this heterogeneity and consider the interconnectedness of its various aspects in modern life.

This interconnectedness is particularly relevant in the context of Yerevan, where residents often form strong emotional attachments to specific locations and imbue them with personal and collective meaning. This understanding of place identity, informed by both Seamon's phenomenological approach and local perspectives like those of Vermishyan, can inform tourism strategies that prioritize authenticity, cultural exchange, and meaningful interactions between locals and visitors.

Such strategies can draw upon Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of interaction (Goffman, 2023), recognizing that individuals in society, including both residents and tourists, strive to present themselves and their city in a favorable light. By fostering authentic experiences that resonate with the local spirit and cultural values, tourism can contribute to the ongoing construction and reinforcement of Yerevan's unique place identity.

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to analyze the diverse ways in which Yerevan is represented and experienced, both by those who live there and those who visit. The aim is to identify opportunities for creating a more comprehensive and authentic representation of the city that acknowledges its complex spatial dimensions and fosters a deeper appreciation of its unique identity.

Methodology

Within the framework of sociological research aimed at revealing the image of Yerevan, this study examined and analyzed the presentations of the city by tour guides, as well as tourist information leaflets provided by the city of Yerevan.

The research was conducted in 2020–2021, with two phases aimed at gathering diverse perspectives on tourism in Yerevan (Petrosyan, 2016, pp. 2–4). In the first phase, a tour guide from a municipality-guaranteed and cooperating tourist company was selected as the initial respondent. The second phase involved a tour guide from the private sector, unaffiliated with the municipality, who was employed by a tourism company recognized as the “Company of the Year of Inbound Tourism” at the 2019 “Armenia Touristicheskaya” award ceremony.

Due to the nature of the research, which focused on the representations of urban space by tour guides, a snowball sampling method was employed to identify information-rich respondents who could complete the list of potential participants, who in turn could identify other suitable respondents. Through this method, a survey was conducted with nine tour guides, with data collection ceasing upon reaching information saturation.

An analysis of tourist information leaflets representing the city of Yerevan was conducted. The suitability of document analysis in this research stems from its reliability, verifiability, and objectivity. This method allows for the collection of comprehensive and unbiased information that directly addresses the research questions. Furthermore, it enables the identification of stable, unchanging sources of information related to the research object, encompassing various levels of detail, content, and relevant context. Within the thematic interviews conducted for this research, tourist information leaflets offered by the selected tour guides' companies were examined, both in print and electronic formats.

In addition to analyzing city tours and tourist information leaflets, a document study was also conducted on the “Inside Yerevan” maps¹, a series of six maps provided by One Armenia NGO. Utilizing a comparative method, this analysis allowed for an understanding of the alternative approach these maps offer to the traditional representation of Yerevan. The maps, spanning from 2015 to 2023, revealed significant differences in the transformations of the city's social and symbolic spaces.

However, a consistent approach was observed throughout the maps that were compiled and developed in real-time, combining physical and social spaces, with locations were chosen based on recommendations from locals and Yerevan residents from various professions.

Specifically, the study analyzed presentations by tour guides from both the public and private sectors, examined tourist information leaflets in various formats, and conducted a comparative analysis of the “Inside Yerevan” maps to understand alternative representations of the city. This multi-faceted methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which Yerevan is presented to tourists. While the conventional approaches to representing Yerevan may offer some insights into the city's history and culture, they also present several limitations and potential negative consequences for the city's overall image. This study will explore these consequences and propose alternative solutions that align with the principles of sustainable tourism and offer a more complex representation of Yerevan's urban landscape.

Touristic Representations of Yerevan

The findings of this study reveal that tour guides predominantly emphasize cultural components rooted in Yerevan's historical past when presenting the city to tourists. This

¹ ONEArmenia, <https://www.onearmenia.org/>.

includes highlighting traditions, customs, and the values of its inhabitants, often framed within narratives of Yerevan’s cultural life, stories, and facts. The city is frequently portrayed as one of the world’s oldest historical and cultural centers, offering tourists the opportunity to experience and immerse themselves in its unique heritage.

Other components mentioned in tour guide presentations include historical events, particularly the city's founding, as well as aspects of climate, population, economic system, political system, scientific and educational life, urban environment from a safety perspective, and locations to purchase Armenian-made products.

Analysis of city tour destinations and points of interest confirms that both tour guides and tourist information leaflets primarily focus on the Kentron administrative district, which encompasses Yerevan’s city center. While some locations outside this district are mentioned, such as the Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Reserve Museum, the Statue of David of Sassoun, the Mother Armenia Memorial, the Shengavit Ancient Site, and Karmir Blur (Red Hill), they are often limited to sites of national and historical significance. This suggests that Yerevan's representation beyond the city center remains minimal and superficial. This deficiency in representation is also reflected in the official tourist map provided by the Yerevan Municipality (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The Official tourist map of Yerevan Municipality.
The source: Yerevan Municipality².

Based on these findings, two primary challenges emerge in the touristic representation of Yerevan:

1. **Geographical Limitation:** City tours predominantly focus on the city center, with limited exploration of other areas in Yerevan, except for sites of national-historical importance.

² Tourism magazines of Yerevan, <https://www.yerevan.am/en/tourism-magazines-of-yerevan/>.

2. **One-Dimensional Representation:** The narratives and descriptions employed in tours tend to be objective and factual, emphasizing the city's historical and cultural heritage while neglecting its social and symbolic dimensions. This results in a limited portrayal of Yerevan as solely a verbal representation of physical space, overlooking its dynamic public life and contemporary urban practices.

The city center, as a multifaceted and multifunctional urban space, embodies the essence of urban complexity. Its centrality, both in a geographic and symbolic sense, brings together various urban elements, including signs and symbols that contribute to the city's unique identity (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 119). These signs, such as streets, sidewalks, benches, and lighting, create a complex urban fabric that fosters a sense of place and belonging.

In the case of Yerevan, the city center designed by Alexander Tamanyan³ serves as the nucleus around which the modern urban space has evolved. However, subsequent urban development, often disregarding the original principles and ideology of Yerevan's urban image, has led to the expansion of the city's territory through the emergence of new administrative districts. These districts, while officially part of Yerevan, often lack the characteristic urban environment and symbolism that define the city center.

This divergence raises questions about the extent to which these outlying communities truly embody the essence of Yerevan's urban space, particularly from a touristic perspective. The emphasis on the city center in tourism representations may stem from its unique character and concentration of historical and cultural landmarks. However, this limited focus risks overlooking the diverse urban experiences and cultural expressions found in other parts of the city.

The geographical boundaries of the Kentron administrative district and the city center are not synonymous. The center, as perceived by individuals, reflects their mental perceptions and experiences rather than a strict administrative designation. This aligns with the theory of American urbanist Kevin Lynch, who argued that successful navigation and interaction with the physical space of a city are largely determined by an individual's mental image of it (Lynch, 1964). Lynch's seminal work, "The Image of the City" (Lynch, 1964), focuses on deciphering the "legibility" of the urban environment, referring to the ease with which different parts of the city can be recognized and classified within mental representations.

The symbolic perception of Yerevan's city center as a distinct and privileged space can be traced back to the hierarchical social policies governing residential space during the Soviet era (Vermishyan, 2021). This period laid the groundwork for the center-periphery disparity that persists to this day, shaping perceptions of social status, cultural significance, and economic opportunity within the city.

The morphology of Yerevan's urbanization, along with its historical state and management systems, has dictated the placement of significant structures within the city's landscape. This includes most buildings of governmental and administrative importance, higher education institutions, former factories, cultural centers, and other prominent landmarks.

³ Alexander Tamanyan was a famous Armenian architect who designed the first master plan of Yerevan (the People's Council of the Armenian SSR approved it in April 1924). The new plan was one of the first significant developments in Soviet urban planning. It was the basis of all subsequent master plans for Yerevan.

However, are the physical spaces initially defined as the sole factors contributing to the uneven distribution of tours? The factors contributing to the uneven distribution of tours in Yerevan extend beyond the initially defined physical spaces (Tadevosyan, 2010). By solely focusing on the location of objects and infrastructure, we overlook the crucial influence of social factors and relationships in shaping urban dynamics. To fully understand this phenomenon, we must consider the interplay between physical and social spaces.

Living space, being both a physical and social construct, has evolved within a hierarchical structure in Yerevan. While this spatial hierarchy may have contributed to the denser distribution and diversity of services in the city center, it's essential to recognize that the physical environment, architecture, styles, and cultural structures of the center also played a significant role in establishing this hierarchy. These pre-existing physical attributes created a foundation upon which the current uneven distribution of services continues to be built.

Therefore, it can be argued that the physical and public spaces in Yerevan are interconnected and have developed in parallel. Spatial relations, including the distribution of services and attractions, are not solely determined by physical location but are also influenced by social factors and the historical context of urban development. This dynamic interplay between physical and social spaces shapes the city's overall character and contributes to the uneven distribution of tours observed in Yerevan.

Thus, while any object can occupy space within a city, it may not necessarily embody the essence of the urban environment or become an integral part of the city's identity. This distinction highlights the importance of considering urban perceptions, which shape the definition of what is considered urban and what is not.

Edward Glaeser (Glaeser, 2012), in his exploration of successful cities, emphasizes four key characteristics: human capital, social connections, physical infrastructure, and a clean environment. While these factors are well-established in urban theory and provide a solid framework for understanding urban development, they don't fully address the subjective experience of urbanity.

If we can identify the specific associations and qualities that people perceive as characteristic of cities – beyond the measurable factors Glaeser outlines – we might hypothesize that these qualities can be artificially constructed or staged in spaces that do not intrinsically possess them, gradually cultivating an urban environment. However, this artificial development cannot occur in isolation; it must be integrated harmoniously with other spatial elements, including those highlighted by Glaeser, to be successful.

This theory suggests that consumption patterns are not solely driven by necessity or natural laws, but rather by cultural influences and social constructs that shape individual desires and preferences.

The spatial overload of Yerevan's city center is a commonly held belief among its residents. Those residing outside the center often perceive their districts as lacking the urban character and accessibility of services found in the central area. This disparity can be attributed not only to the historical and political factors that shaped Yerevan's urban development but also to the emotional attachment and symbolism associated with certain central locations. The attractiveness of these places is often derived not solely from the quality of services offered but also from the unique atmosphere and cultural significance of the space itself.

Therefore, the issue of the geographical confinement of tours, primarily showcasing the city center, stems from the aforementioned reasons. Only the city center in Yerevan embodies the distinct urban characteristics that attract tourists. Unfortunately, these characteristics are largely absent in the physical spaces outside the city center.

The next challenge, however, is more profound and holds greater significance for the city's image.

The predominant narratives used to represent Yerevan, which are primarily objective and focus on verbal interpretations of the city's physical space, fail to provide a comprehensive or even near-complete picture of the city's essence. Urban phenomena are inherently interconnected and emerge through complex cause-and-effect relationships between different spaces. In this context, public relations and the nuances of public perception of urban spaces are of paramount importance (Lefebvre, 1991).

The presentation of the urban physical space is accentuated, and highlighted by architecture and urban planning, which serve as the external manifestation of the city (Ma et al., 2018, p. 76). However, within the social space, the objective and subjective characteristics of the city converge, a phenomenon that Pierre Bourdieu describes as the “introduction of social reality into the physical world,” where social realities become deeply embedded within the physical environment (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 36).

Lefebvre posits that every space inherently implies, contains, and conceals social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). This theory holds significant relevance for our research, primarily because it underscores the multifaceted nature of space. A complete perception of space cannot be attributed to a single factor; it is always a complex interplay of various elements (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019).

Adopting Lefebvre's dialectical theory as a paradigm, we acknowledge that societies can shape their environment through the interplay between physical space and mental perceptions of space. These two elements serve as dialectical poles, constantly interacting and influencing one another. In this framework, any man-made space inherently implies a specific system of social relations, reflecting the values, norms, and power dynamics of the society that created it.

In the study of urban spaces, particularly when aiming for a comprehensive understanding of the city, it is crucial to consider the symbols and signs that are not merely static elements but integral components of the dynamic process of everyday communication. These symbols convey a wide range of human emotions, desires, ideals, values, hopes, and aspirations. Understanding how these symbols are perceived, accepted, and emotionally experienced by individuals provides valuable insights into their impact on the psychological atmosphere of the city. Ultimately, these symbols shape the consumer and their role within society, city, and infrastructure (Gottdiener, 1995).

Building upon Seamon's emphasis on the tripartite relationship between people, places, and local spirit (Seamon, 2012, p. 10), we recognize the important role of local agents in shaping the meanings and experiences associated with urban spaces. These agents, whether residents, administrators, or other stakeholders, are not merely passive occupants of the city but active participants in its ongoing construction and interpretation.

These relationships are effectively elucidated through the concept of epistemic relativity, which posits that knowledge is relative to the framework within which it is constructed. To illustrate this, we can turn to contrasting perspectives. Paul Lazarsfeld, a proponent of scientism, championed the superiority of scientific, methodological

knowledge over common sense (Lazarsfeld, 1949). Conversely, James Scott and Harold Garfinkel argued that even the most uneducated resident possesses valuable local knowledge that surpasses that of a researcher relying solely on methodological tools (Scott, 2020).

However, both perspectives operate within specific axiomatic assumptions. While the city itself remains a singular entity, the languages used to describe it are diverse and varied. Therefore, inconsistencies in knowledge about the city arise not from the inherent structure of the city itself, but from the different lenses through which it is interpreted and represented.

Inside Yerevan: Locals' Perspective

The Armenian government's focus on tourism as a key economic driver has led to efforts to promote the country as a favorable tourist destination⁴. However, the current approach to representing Yerevan in traditional city tours often presents a one-dimensional image, primarily emphasizing the physical and historical-cultural aspects while neglecting the city's vibrant social and symbolic dimensions. This limited representation contradicts the principles of sustainable tourism, which advocate for a more holistic understanding of urban spaces, encompassing not only physical attractions but also the social interactions and lived experiences that contribute to a city's unique character.

Recognizing the theoretical and practical limitations of privileging certain urban spaces over others, traditional city tours in Yerevan are increasingly being complemented by alternative approaches, such as the “Inside Yerevan” tourist maps⁵ developed by the “One Armenia” NGO. These maps offer a more nuanced and comprehensive representation of the city, eschewing a hierarchical view of urban space and instead showcasing Yerevan as a complex entity with interconnected spatial layers.

Since 2015, “One Armenia” has released six editions of the “Inside Yerevan” map, with the latest iteration published in 2023. These maps aim to fill the information gap often found in traditional tourist materials by highlighting the city's lesser-known gems and local favorites (fig. 2 & 3). As stated on their website, “Unlike other tourist maps that mainly represent service sub-structures – hotels, tourist attractions, popular restaurants, etc., and are promotional in nature, we want to create something more unique, without pursuing commercial goals”. This approach prioritizes authenticity and local perspectives, offering visitors a more immersive and enriching experience of Yerevan's urban landscape.

The demands of contemporary tourists are increasingly experiential, seeking emotional fulfillment, authenticity, and active engagement with their surroundings. In the context of urban tourism, this manifests as a desire to discover the “unseen” city, the real and perceived spaces frequented by locals. Tourists often pose the question, “Where do the locals go?”, hoping to uncover hidden gems and gain a more authentic understanding of the city's culture and lifestyle.

⁴ International Trade Administration, <https://www.trade.gov/>.

⁵ ONEArmenia, <https://www.onearmenia.org/>.



Fig. 2. The first edition of “Inside Yerevan” map, 2015. The source: One Armenia NGO.



Fig. 3. Last edition of “Inside Yerevan” Map, 2023. The source: One Armenia NGO

However, city dwellers themselves perceive the city not as a collection of isolated elements but as a holistic space. Their focus lies on the dynamic interplay between people and their environment, the social interactions, and cultural practices that give the city its unique character.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1998), the stability of urban life, traditionally associated with a sense of place and belonging, is being challenged by the forces of globalization. This shift has exacerbated the contradictions between two social groups, not primarily based on material wealth, but rather on their degree of integration into urban communication processes. City dwellers are no longer simply divided into rich and poor but into those who are connected and engaged with the city's social fabric, and those who are marginalized and excluded. This growing awareness of social fragmentation and exclusion underscores the importance of fostering strong local places and identities in an increasingly globalized world (Vermishyan et al., 2015).

In Yerevan, the phenomenon of social spaces shaping consumer behavior is particularly evident in the context of cafes. These establishments often dictate the conduct of their patrons, establishing symbolic markers that, through consumption, allow customers to identify with a specific social group. This aligns with the common traveler's advice to “go where the locals go,” which extends beyond merely finding dining options to encompass a broader desire to experience the authentic social and cultural life of the city⁶.

Currently, emerging trends in urban development are driven by the evolving ideologies of young people, their global perspectives, and their desire to create urban spaces that cater to their specific needs and preferences. These groups are no longer solely focused on commercialization or business interests. Instead, they are actively shaping urban spaces based on cultural strata, individual preferences, ideological affiliations, and symbolic meanings.

Since the 2000s, similar cultural and subcultural spaces have emerged in Yerevan, including pubs, gardens, streets, and cafes, each with its unique identity and social significance. In the early 2010s, Sundukyan Park became a gathering spot for rock music enthusiasts, while Saryan Street attracted artists and bohemian youth. Hrazdan Gorge underwent a transformation in its semantic perception, blending residential, commercial, and leisure spaces, resulting in complex and diverse interpretations. These local associations, shaped by social relations, gradually gained broader recognition and became part of the city's identity, eventually being transmitted to tourists.

While numerous maps depict Yerevan, they often differ in their thematic focus and presentation approach. The Inside Yerevan maps, however, stand out due to their unique approach of entrusting the map's content to local residents. Since their inception, these maps have utilized public surveys to identify the most cherished places among Yerevan locals, highlighting locations that hold specific local significance and are distinguished by their unique ambiance and visitor preferences.

Furthermore, several active citizens residing in Yerevan, representing diverse professions, contribute their personal recommendations of beloved places, further solidifying the map's commitment to fostering connections between locals and tourists while showcasing the authentic urban environment. Notably, the first edition of the map featured individuals who, despite not being Armenian or born in Armenia, had lived in Yerevan for an extended period. This inclusion underscores the importance of urban spaces

⁶ ONEArmenia, <https://www.onearmenia.org/>.

and the vibrant cultural and social life that shapes them, regardless of an individual's background or origin.

The figure is a collage of various informational panels from the 2023 'Inside Yerevan' Map. The panels are arranged in a grid-like fashion, each containing text, icons, and small illustrations. Key sections include:

- EXPLORE YEREVAN'S FOOD AND WINE SCENE:** Discusses the city's food culture, mentioning traditional dishes like dolma and modern dining options.
- GETTING INSIDE YEREVAN:** Provides information about public transport, including the Metro and trolleybuses, and offers tips for navigating the city.
- GETTING AROUND YEREVAN:** Details the city's infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and the location of major landmarks.
- INSIDE YEREVAN MAP 2023:** A central map showing the city's layout with various icons representing different points of interest.
- GET A TASTE OF LOCAL HOSPITALITY:** Encourages visitors to try local dishes and beverages, highlighting the city's rich culinary heritage.
- TRAVELING OFF THE BEATEN PATH:** Suggests exploring lesser-known areas of the city to discover hidden gems.
- GETTING TO KNOW YEREVAN:** Offers a brief overview of the city's history, culture, and current state.
- YEREVAN HIGHLIGHTS:** Lists key attractions and events that define the city's identity.
- 2492 TRAVEL:** A section promoting a travel agency, featuring a QR code and contact information.

Fig. 4. The information about the city on the 2023 edition of "Inside Yerevan" Map. The source: One Armenia NGO.

Beyond basic entertainment venues, the "Inside Yerevan" map offers information on local landmarks, fountains, non-tourist shops selling Armenian products, and online resources for staying informed about city events. This reflects an intriguing local manifestation of hipster urbanism (fig. 4), where society seeks to imbue specific places or spaces with symbolic meaning and emphasize belonging to those spaces through consumption.

Modern urban tourists aspire to understand the city by engaging with its public and symbolic spaces. By consuming services in these spaces, they also consume the ambiance and cultural significance embedded within them. The space itself becomes a symbolic element that enhances the service or place, playing a crucial role in shaping its market position, demand, and overall contribution to the urban image.

Conclusion

The current state of touristic representation in Yerevan reveals a predominant focus on the city center and its historical-cultural narratives, often neglecting the diverse social and symbolic spaces that contribute to the city's unique identity. While this approach may be attributed to the city center's distinct urban character and historical significance, it also results in a limited and one-dimensional portrayal of Yerevan.

The first problem, the geographical confinement of city tours to the city center, while understandable due to the concentration of urban features and tourist attractions in this area, often lacks viable alternatives, and nevertheless presents a missed opportunity to showcase the city's broader urban fabric and diverse neighborhoods.

The second problem, the overemphasis on physical space and historical-cultural narratives, poses a more significant challenge to Yerevan's image. This one-sided representation overlooks the dynamic social and symbolic dimensions of the city, failing to capture the lived experiences and cultural practices of its inhabitants. This not only contradicts the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasizes cultural exchange and social interaction but also limits the potential for tourists to experience the city's true essence.

The “Inside Yerevan” map emerges as a potential solution to this issue. By presenting the city as a complex entity with interconnected spatial layers and highlighting local recommendations and experiences, it offers a more holistic and authentic representation of Yerevan. This approach not only caters to the evolving demands of modern tourists, who seek emotional fulfillment and authentic engagement with their surroundings but also aligns with the philosophy of sustainable development, which emphasizes the importance of social and cultural considerations alongside economic benefits.

In conclusion, while the presentation of Yerevan's physical space and historical-cultural narratives remains important, it is crucial to recognize the value of alternative representations that encompass the city's social and symbolic spaces, everyday practices, and diverse cultural expressions. By adopting a more comprehensive approach, Yerevan can create a more authentic and sustainable tourism model that benefits both visitors and residents alike.

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