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Paddison, Brendan and Hall, Jenny

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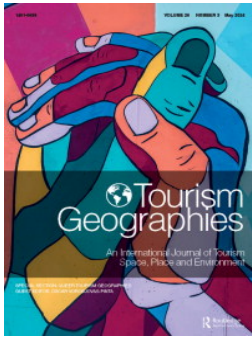
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Regenerative tourism development as a response to crisis: harnessing practise-led approaches

Brendan Paddison  and Jenny Hall 

York Business School, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

The pandemic has drawn attention to the unsustainable nature of tourism, intensifying social and economic inequalities and heightening issues of urban vulnerability. As destinations reimagine their future, a holistic approach that addresses social and ecological perspectives through collaboration, stewardship and environmental ethics is required. Regenerative tourism enables destination communities to develop new ways of thinking and build the capability and capacity to work towards embedding tourism practices and ecological processes that advocate human and non-human health and wellbeing. As the tourist-historic city of York, United Kingdom emerged from the pandemic, practice-led regenerative development was evident in the city's framework for post-Covid recovery and renewal. Semi-structured interviews with leading stakeholders identified how communities can build sustainable city ecologies through living systems thinking, evidenced through collaborative models of engagement. In York, the pandemic catalysed community stewardship and a re-orientation towards a more inclusive tourism environment. This research demonstrates how regenerative practice principles manifest in the interconnections and the networks that support the distinctive qualities and needs of York's local communities. The study also contributes to understanding how regenerative tourism approaches support cultural revival, as evident in York. Such approaches to tourism management in historic cities highlights the transformative potential of practice-led regenerative development as a tool for addressing tourism development concerns in urban spaces.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the unsustainable nature of tourism, resulting in an urgent need to advance non-neoliberal models of tourism engagement and exchange. Tourism policy tends to focus on economic priorities, with little concern shown for addressing the wider impacts of tourism. Furthermore, meaningful consideration or engagement with relevant stakeholders in the tourism development, strategy

and policy creation process is often lacking (Joppe, 2018). This creates a multitude of geographical injustices (Paddison & Hall, 2022; Soja, 2010) and perpetuates the challenges of tourism. Consequently, there is a need for research that focuses on the extent to which communities are meaningfully engaged in the tourism development and policy creation process (Joppe, 2018; Paddison & Walmsley, 2018). This is specifically the case in historic cities (Paddison & Hall, 2022), where the creation of place-based heritage products is threatening the sustainability of these spaces (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021). If concerns regarding the economic, social, and environmental inequalities of tourism are to be addressed, tourism needs to be reimagined (Rastegar et al., 2021), with an examination of the extent to which local communities are engaged in co-creating tourism development and its management.

The neoliberal industrial model of tourism has resulted in tourism success measured in terms of economic priorities (Paddison & Walmsley, 2018). Tourism has become appropriated by corporate interests, with little, if any, attention given to building a healthy city ecology (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). Such extractive approaches have resulted in ecological destruction, economic failure, and social inequalities that have excluded community stakeholders from actively engaging in destination development (Duxbury et al., 2020; Hall, 2019). In the broader context of sustainable tourism development, regenerative tourism challenges neoliberal capitalism by enabling community stakeholders to actively participate in tourism development and policymaking in a way that is sensitive to long term needs. This is crucial in facilitating a representative and balanced perspective of the destination community (Dredge, 2022). Regenerative tourism enables host communities to build the capability and capacity to work towards distributive social justice through adopting active roles as stewards within destinations (Bellato et al., 2022b; Cave & Dredge, 2020).

If concerns regarding the impacts of tourism are to be addressed, we need think radically about the regenerative dimensions of tourism in facilitating a more sustainable future. Regenerative development is concerned with fostering new ways of thinking and practice-led interventions that are created and driven by host communities. The conceptual foundations of regenerative tourism are informed by Indigenous peoples' worldviews, knowledge and culture (Mang & Reed, 2019), *'which sees the world as a dynamic complex whole with self-organising properties'* (Bellato et al., 2022a, p.5). This revival of holistically appreciating life as a complex living system is conceptually new in tourism (Mang & Reed, 2019). Moreover, although numerous studies of sustainable destination development are evident (Nunkoo et al., 2013; Paddison & Hall, 2022), there is a lack of research concerned with the application of theory in relation to regenerative destination development (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Scheyvens, 2024), particularly in historic urban environments. Specifically, there is a lack of research examining how regenerative approaches to tourism could address the challenges faced in urban historic destinations as they seek to address the tensions arising between post COVID-19 recovery and sustainable tourism development.

Furthermore, Bellato & Cheer (2021), call for case study research that examines approaches to engaging diverse stakeholders in regenerative tourism development. Therefore, through an exploration of how active living systems in tourism can critically shift tourism policy and management, this research sought to understand how, through collaboration, human and non-human stakeholders might contribute to destination

development in the tourist-historic city of York, United Kingdom (UK). Moreover, the aim was to understand how living systems thinking manifests organically through stakeholder practices and collaborative action. Examining sustainability in the context of city destinations is critical when analysing the impacts and broader sustainability issues related to tourism (Aall & Koens, 2019). Tourist-Historic Cities are characterized by urban structures, natural resources, architecture, and culture where the historic core has become the object of tourist consumption (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). However, as Timothy (2011) warns, the creation of place-based heritage products can threaten the sustainability of these spaces, with Novy & Colomb (2019, p.358) adopting the term '*touristification*' to describe how models of capitalism have commodified urban spaces.

In the case of York, UK following the decline of the railway and chocolate industries in the late 1980s, tourism is now the city's leading economic sector, welcoming 8.9 million visitors a year, supporting approximately 17,000 jobs and worth £1.7 billion to the local economy (Visit York, 2023). York's popularity is afforded to its rich and diverse historic architecture and heritage attractions that are encapsulated within its medieval city walls. The historic centre of York is unique due to its geographically compact nature, its internationally important cathedral and well-preserved ancient Roman and Viking archaeology. It was apparent in York that several stakeholders were beginning to explore how regenerative approaches offered a unique perspective of overcoming some of the negative impacts of neoliberalism. Drawing upon Bellato et al.'s (2022a) conceptual framework, it was within this context that we examined how practice-led regenerative approaches in York were crucial for community recovery and renewal when faced with the devastating socio-economic impacts produced by COVID-19. This research contributes new understandings of how, during the pandemic, York's local communities created capacity through practice-led collaborations that are beginning to rebalance the city's tourism ecology.

Literature review

The democratisation of tourism, liberalised by consumer capitalism and driven by social norms associated with the commercial imperative of the 'tourist experience', has placed tourism on a socio-economic pedestal of all that is 'good' socially, economically, and culturally (Jamal & Higham, 2021). However, the implications that manifest from this focus on an economic growth model of tourism consumption and exchange have resulted in deep social divisions and inequalities (Jamal & Higham, 2021). The pandemic accelerated this, with attention drawn to the extent to which tourism has contributed to workforce inequality, discrimination, poverty, economic inequalities, and ecological harms (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

The cost of not recognising tourism's role in the city has led to a decline in the wellbeing of the city ecology, including human and non-human stakeholders, such as residents, businesses, public spaces, governance processes, biodiversity, architecture and rivers. For Daly (1999, p.8), this is uneconomic, where '*the social and environmental sacrifices made necessary by that growing encroachment on the eco-system*' imposed by tourism have seen the outward migration of the cities local communities (Soja, 2010). Tourism is a highly dynamic, complex system, with networks of key actors and stakeholders, which can be a powerful agent of change, but troubled by inherent fragilities

(D'Angela & Go, 2009). Consequently, there is an urgent need to re-engage destination stakeholders, particularly in historic destinations where commodification threatens the sustainability of these places (Liu et al., 2022). Regenerative tourism claims to deliver capacity building to enable multiple and a diverse range of stakeholders to enact their role as stewards of their place. In this context, stakeholders are contributing to the health and wellbeing of their places through an ethic of care and respect (Pollock, 2015).

Regenerative tourism

Regenerative tourism '*represents a comprehensive and mature approach to designing the future of tourism*' (Sheldon, 2022, p.6). Regenerative tourism draws from a range of ecological perspectives, including Indigenous cultures, knowledge systems and Western science and practice (Matunga et al., 2020). Although there is little consensus regarding a single definition of regenerative tourism, Bellato et al. (2022a, p.11) propose a working definition that describes regenerative tourism as a '*transformational approach*' that enables destinations to '*flourish*' through creating '*net positive effects*' by '*increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems.*' Thus, regenerative tourism is primarily concerned with promoting healthy living systems (Pollock, 2019) where emergent, evolutionary, dynamic, and interconnected relationships exist between people, place and nature. Regenerative tourism is about how social-ecological systems and processes can improve and transform tourism through embedding local cultural and natural patterns within destination development approaches (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Duxbury et al., 2020; Hes & Coenen, 2018). Rather than focusing on managing the social-ecological impacts of tourism activity, regenerative tourism interventions are concerned with building the capacity of whole systems for restoration and regeneration (Becken & Kaur, 2021) that produce net-positive effects (Mang & Haggard, 2016).

Indeed, regenerative development focused on protecting and promoting local identity can be instrumental in building resilient tourism systems that offers an alternative to an extractive industrial approach to tourism (Hussain, 2021). Growing discontent has led researchers to explore regenerative tourism approaches to find ways to build capacity and restore ecosystems, community wellbeing (Cave & Dredge, 2020), build alternative economies (Pollock, 2015), and address the economic concerns that persist following the pandemic (Hussain & Haley, 2022). Arising '*from the margins of tourism practice*' (Bellato & Cheer, 2021, p.947), regenerative development enables communities to act as stewards through '*positive development*' and co-production that generates the capacity to restore ecosystems (Hes & Du Plessis, 2014, p.21). For Dredge (2022, p.1), this requires a paradigm shift, moving from a 'me' to a 'we' mindset, with the adoption of a place-based, community-centred, and environment focused approach concerned with compassion, empathy and collaborative actions.

When applying regenerative approaches, the sources of knowing, being and doing will differ in each place. In the case of York (and more widely across Europe), it may be more appropriate to categorise community members as locals or local knowledge holders that draw from place-sourced knowledges. The city of York has

an ancient heritage of local micro and small business enterprises that form a substantive part of York's retail and service industry, many of which are orientated towards tourism. This community of small traders have long established networks where collaborative action and knowledge sharing are prevalent. This practice of knowledge sharing and collaboration are grounded in ancient traditions of trader associations (guilds) that span nine hundred years in York (Dobson & Smith, 2006). This research shows how grassroots trader associations have evolved organic processes that evidence living systems thinking and the regenerative power this has had in York.

A conceptual framework for practice-led regenerative tourism

Bellato et al. (2022a, p.17) developed a conceptual framework for practice-led regenerative tourism where '*regeneration occurs mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, culturally, socially, environmentally, and economically*'. This framework identifies seven conceptual principles which recognise tourism as a living system that facilitates encounters, creates connections and develops reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships.

These include: 1: Drawing from an ecological worldview; 2: Using living systems thinking; 3: Discovering the unique potential of a regenerative tourism place; 4: Leveraging the capability of tourism living systems to catalyse transformations; 5: Adopting healing approaches that promote cultural revival, returning lands, and privileging of the perspectives, knowledges and practices of Indigenous and marginalised peoples; 6: Creating regenerative places and communities; and 7: Collaborating to evolve and enact regenerative tourism approaches. These stakeholder characteristics are fundamental for a tourism living system to work as a holistic ecological system (Bellato et al., 2022a, 2022b). This necessitates the active engagement of all destination stakeholders, across public, private and third sector, to enable innovative solutions and regenerative approaches to be identified that prioritises the interests of destination communities (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017).

In a post-pandemic context, genuine and meaningful stakeholder engagement is essential for sustainable tourism development (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2017), where all relevant stakeholders are empowered to contribute to the tourism decision-making and the policy creation process (Byrd, 2007). An inclusive and collaborative approach is encouraged where destination stakeholders can directly influence the scale and pace of tourism development and decision-making. Indeed, there is a need for collaborative planning that enables the diversity of stakeholders to effectively engage in decision-making and stewardship processes. However, as Cheer (2018) reminds us, it is often host communities who are prevented from harnessing the full benefits of sustainable tourism development. Scholars and practitioners are calling for communities to be empowered to realise transformative roles as stewards to create sustainable futures for host destinations (Pollock, 2015). This transformation is being underpinned by innovative solutions to place-making, development and management (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Hes & Du Plessis, 2014).

Tourism as a living system: a framework for analysis

Tourism is becoming increasingly recognized as an *'interrelated system within the larger ecological living system'* (Jamrozy, 2007, p.125), with living systems thinking being applied to tourism within the context of regenerative development (Bellato et al., 2022a). Tourism as a living system advocates for a transformation of theory and practice by developing knowledge concerning the interconnections and interrelationships between human and non-human stakeholders (Bellato et al., 2022b). In tourism living systems, all stakeholders (human and non-human) are recognized as one living ecology and are empowered through processes of reciprocity and collaboration. This represents a paradigm shift that moves away from extractive neoliberal consumer capitalism to a more just and sustainable system by critically understanding the roles adopted by tourism actors and how this applies within regeneration development (Bellato et al., 2022b).

Due to the dominance of industrial approaches in tourism research, tourism living systems thinking has rarely been applied to destinations (Bellato et al., 2022b), and none have explored this in the context of historic cities. This paper identifies emergent stakeholder characteristics which echo some of Bellato et al.'s (2022a) seven principles in an urban historic city during and post COVID-19. Whilst the concept of regenerative tourism is not new, studies examining the role tourism stakeholders have in contributing towards the creation of practices that advance regenerative tourism principles are sparse (Ateljevic, 2020; Cave & Dredge, 2020; Mathisen et al., 2022), necessitating research that specifically focuses on the role of destination stakeholders in the regenerative tourism transformation process (Scheyvens, 2024).

Methodology

The methodological underpinnings of this study are interpretive within an overall case study design (Saunders et al., 2021). The case study approach was chosen as it provided an opportunity to explore, analyse and interpret a phenomenon from different perspectives (Dredge, 2006). In-depth, interpretive interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key informants from York. Key informants are understood here as including officials working at the local destination management organisation (DMO), executive officers from local government, local politicians, resident groups, and independent business owners. A purposeful sampling approach was adopted, with a view to understanding how elements of a regenerative approach were applied in reimagining the role of tourism in York. In total, seventeen stakeholder representatives were interviewed (Table 1). Justifying the number of participants is not an exact science in qualitative research (Saunders & Townsend, 2016) and will depend on representativeness and the quality of responses (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012). Data collection focused on expert opinion, combined with the notion of saturation, resources and access until a robust case could be made (Saunders et al., 2021).

A semi-structured (Saunders et al., 2021) interview schedule was based on themes that had emerged from the literature including regenerative approaches to stakeholder engagement and the impact of the pandemic. A key consideration underpinning the interviews was to allow for as natural a conversational flow as possible, thereby

Table 1. Study participants.

Participant	Sector
Pb1	Public sector
Pb2	Public sector
Pb3	Public sector, charitable
Pb4	Public sector, charitable
Pb5	Public sector
Pr1	Private sector
Pr2	Private sector
Pr3	Private sector
Pr4	Private sector
Pr5	Private sector
Pr6	Private sector
Pr7	Private sector
Pr8	Private sector
Pr9	Private sector
R1	Resident
R2	Resident
R3	Resident

permitting the emergence of novel themes (Kvale, 1996), and the open and honest expression of views in the sense of having a ‘*conversation with a purpose*’ (Burgess, 1984, p.102). The interview design enabled the ongoing inclusion of themes that arose in earlier interviews. Informed consent was secured from participants and interviews lasted on average forty-five minutes, were transcribed, and later transferred to NVivo 12 for analysis. Thematic analysis enabled patterns and themes to be identified providing rigour and validity in the qualitative data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes included collaboration, tourism living systems, cultural identity, inequalities, innovation, regenerative practices, and stakeholder engagement, and were grouped together using Bellato et al.’s (2022a) principles. All participant data was pseudo-anonymised to protect identity and ethical institutional approval was granted.

Case study context

York is one of England’s most historic cities. Founded as a Roman fort in AD71 at the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss, the city has witnessed Viking invasions, Civil War sieges, industrial growth and changing industries. The city centre, which is dominated by York Minster, the largest Gothic cathedral in Northern Europe, is encapsulated within an almost complete medieval wall, with a street pattern that has evolved during Roman, Viking and medieval periods. The city is known for its rail and confectionery heritage and for its scientific innovation and social reform. By the twentieth century, York prospered as a major railway centre and confectionery manufacturer. However, during the 1980s these two substantial economic sectors rapidly declined, with the closure of the final railway engineering works in 1995 (Meethan, 1997). It was during this time that the service sector started to grow, leading to the economy of the city becoming dependent on the service industry, within which tourism played a significant role (Meethan, 1997). The rich and diverse history of York is afforded to its popularity as a tourist destination. As visitor numbers began to increase, the City Council introduced tourism development measures to manage visitors and implemented conservation policies to protect and enhance the fabric of the city, which created a tourism enclave (Mordue, 2007). Industry and retail were

decentralised from the city centre allowing for the development of leisure and specialist retail. In addition, purpose-built attractions were created, such as the Jorvik Viking Centre, which opened in 1984 (Meethan, 1997). Alongside tourism, retail and hospitality, industries that are particularly well represented in York include biotechnology, digital and the creative industries, rail, and finance and professional services. York is the only UK city to hold the UNESCO City of Media Arts designation, awarded in 2014.

Findings and discussion

Building on Bellato et al.'s (2022a) regenerative tourism development principles, this study highlights the impact organic social processes and practices can have on a historic city ecology. This analytical experiment explores how COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for change by demonstrating how tourism stakeholders began to influence regenerative practice-led approaches to tourism in York. Although not explicitly recognised, our analysis identified how local knowledge, and the distinctive and unique potential of the city's identity, influenced capacity building and collaborative action. This research demonstrates how these combined forces can facilitate living systems thinking that leads to regenerative tourism processes and practices that offer historic city destinations transformational solutions for sustainable tourism futures.

The analysis focuses on three of Bellato et al.'s (2022a) principles: *Principle 3: Discover the unique potential of a regenerative tourism place*, *Principle 4: Leverage the capability of tourism living systems to catalyse transformations*, and *Principle 7: Collaborate to evolve and enact regenerative tourism approaches*. Whilst not always explicit, we did find examples of stakeholders working towards *Principle 2: Use living systems thinking* and we have noted this accordingly. Although our analysis only focuses on three of the regenerative tourism principles, it does evidence the interrelatedness of these principles throughout the case study.

Principle 3: discovering unique potential

From our analysis, we identified several examples that support Principle 3. A significant reason for York's development as a location for leisure, retail and tourism is due to its historic character and urban design. York is a walled city with a high proportion of small, listed buildings combined with planning restrictions that prevented mass demolition seen in other urban areas. As one respondent commented, 'York's heritage has protected its historic character' and 'the city never over expanded because it couldn't' (Pr3). In addition, York has a burgeoning independent business culture, with 65% of all businesses being independent, small to medium-sized enterprises. The Shambles, a medieval street of timber framed buildings, is 'pretty much an entire street of independent businesses' (Pr3). York also has 'one of the largest foot street networks without cars in the north [of England]' (Pb4). This evidences the unique, if somewhat ad-hoc, city environment, which has nurtured a strong sense of identity amongst its independent business community and contributes to a regenerative mindset.

Although the pandemic threatened many local businesses, it also accelerated collaborative action and self-organised solutions to create net positive ecological systems effects. This included innovative delivery services, digital community forums and the formation of collaborative traders' networks such as the York Retail Forum and Indie York (supporting 260 independent businesses). It is evident that this sense of community proved crucial to York's response to the pandemic, expressed by one respondent as one of 'the strengths of York, when compared to other cities. When businesses had to adapt, they innovated, which included trading online, setting up online portals. This meant many of them survived' (Pr6).

This sense of self-organisation and identity is rooted in local community networks that existed prior to the pandemic. Research participants described how local communities had successfully adopted a regenerative mindset to restore ecosystem services through the sharing of knowledge and resources within business networks, as one respondent described: 'It's a really good city to be independent, people really support each other' (Pr7).

Such attitudes provided solid foundations which accelerated collaborative action to revitalise and nurture the community (Mang & Reed, 2012), offering a clear example of how living systems thinking underpins such initiatives. Consequently, there has been a positive change in local resident behaviour, with 'people re-engaging with our city' (Pr3). Respecting community knowledge networks facilitates the growth of healthy socio-ecological city systems and achieves transformational regenerative development (Bellato et al., 2022a). This was evidenced by the independent sectors' active self-organising and self-sustaining engagement which built capacity through local business owners adopting stewardship roles by establishing new trader's networks such as the Goodramgate Traders Association, whose mission is to encourage locals and visitors to this independent business quarter. Acknowledging the importance of local businesses, one city official stated that independent businesses were 'critical in York's recovery' (Pb2) and helped the city outperform its visitor numbers in the summers of 2020 and 2021 (Paddison & Hall, 2022). A turn to localism has driven this cultural revival in distinct areas of the city, such as Goodramgate, and is deeply embodied in a sense of community identity. Whilst all the traders acknowledged the importance of tourism, they expressed how their businesses were oriented towards providing goods and services for the local community. As one respondent commented, 'We aim for local trade, that's our main target' (Pr8). This extended beyond items and goods for sale but also harnessed latent capacity to animate street spaces through collaborative festivals and events. For example, a small green open space in the Goodramgate area has been reappropriated by local businesses to create a recreational and social space nicknamed 'cupcake corner' due there being three cafes surrounding it:

Spaces have been reclaimed in the city as a result of the pandemic as we had to use spaces differently. That's transformed not just the way in which the space is used, but also the different kinds of people who now use that space. Notably, local people come in to the city centre. I think about how that's changed, the way the city now works spatially for local people and for businesses (Pr9)

York's pandemic story demonstrates how powerful tourism living systems thinking can be realized when key actors, such as public authorities who govern non-human

city spaces, work collaboratively to regenerate and reappropriate these spaces to meet local needs. In turn, this levers capacity and capability to innovate and sustain business communities and demonstrates the importance of public authorities respecting and honouring the distinct qualities of local knowledge, identity and practice. As one respondent described:

If the council can do one thing, it's not coming up with blueprints or plans behind closed doors. We've seen that fail in other cities. Since the pandemic, the council has got better at listening to and understanding the views of businesses and the local community (Pb4)

Our research found evidence of stakeholders organically working together to identify York's unique potential which extended beyond York being seen as just a tourist destination. For example, the 'York Narrative', a grassroots organic project which was adopted by York's public authorities, aimed to identify the values that the city's communities cherished through consultative storytelling. The primary aim of the project was to 'rebalance the local economy and to try to understand authentic York'. The values identified 'are a way of describing what people feel most represent York' (Pb5), with these values subsequently informing public policy and decision-making. The project evidences a turn to local knowledge and valuing local identity that demonstrates principle's 3 and 4. By recognising the organic development of York's identity as a place for independent business, the York Narrative project has identified the city's unique potential and demonstrates the importance of valuing, respecting and acting upon local knowledge. The project encouraged creative thinking and innovation that has potential to positively contribute to York's future through integrating tourism as part of York's wider ecology. This would help facilitate a future where York is an integrated place with potential beyond that of a tourist destination. This demonstrates the power of living systems thinking.

Principle 4: leveraging the capability of tourism living systems to catalyse transformation

York's public officials described how volunteering and collaborative action during the pandemic created capacity and practice-led approaches to reclaiming non-human amenities, such as pubs and libraries, with the view that when 'owned by residents, spaces that people feel they can take charge of and develop as cultural products show great potential' (Pr1). There was a shift in recognition that 'public spaces and venues need to facilitate more mixed and exciting uses' (Pr1) to stimulate distinctive local cultural expression. Moreover, there was recognition of the potential of enabling local communities to reclaim the city's social life through reappropriating non-human public spaces. As one respondent commented, facilitating local communities to produce events creates a 'readymade audience' which results in a 'distinctive community and environment' (Pr1). Indeed, this can be described as a 'lightbulb' or 'watershed' moment, with a growing recognition that a city's socio-cultural life is what makes a place distinctive and fundamental for developing a balanced ecological city system predicated on practice-led collaboration. This evidences a recognition that community identity is a powerful regenerative lever to build capacity and achieve systemic change of York's tourism and wider social-ecological systems (Bellato et al.,

2022a). Policymakers in York understand the importance of this and that ‘cultural product development needs to be something that’s done as an extension of people’s natural behaviour that they like to do instinctively’ (Pr3). Public authorities are beginning to recognise that active collaboration between the wider city ecology (human and non-human, tangible and intangible) is a critical lever for regeneration (Bellato et al., 2022a). Implementing it, however, is another matter, as one respondent commented:

The pandemic has opened [a] vista of what is possible in terms of engaging with new audiences, allowing people to say there’s a different imperative now, [and] think about how to rebalance. That moment might not last long, but it is a moment to act! (Pb1)

As evidenced here, the reclaiming of local amenities leads to broader systems transformations, becoming levers for intervention and cultural change (Mang & Haggard, 2016). However, seizing the moment is a key challenge and calls for practice-led approaches that facilitate stakeholder engagement to reanimate the social and cultural life of the city (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2019). Although not explicit, it is indicative of adopting a living systems approach for developing and reviving distinctive local cultural products and amenities which points to a sustainable and regenerative approach for reshaping tourism (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Mang & Haggard, 2016).

Principle 7: collaborate to evolve and enact regenerative tourism approaches

Notwithstanding the negative impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in York, this study identified how the pandemic had several positive outcomes, particularly where communities galvanised in active participation to manage the challenges the tourism sector faced. For example, the local authority facilitated the establishment of the York Tourism Advisory Board (TAB), which aimed to broaden engagement in tourism decision-making by bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders in an ‘unprecedented moment of collaboration’ (Pr3). Stakeholders beyond that of the immediate tourism and hospitality sector involved in the TAB include family and young people, disability and accessibility groups, the education sector, transport representatives, climate change representation, public sector bodies, and the TAB actively engages with residents *via* the newly established Residents’ Assembly. As one respondent expressed, ‘[it] was a unique moment of good coordination, which is not usual practice’ (Pr7). It led to ‘a better working relationship between the city council and its community’ (Pr4), with ‘the city maximizing its small size to get the right stakeholders together’ (Pr6). Consequently, the local authority recognized that ‘being open with information that is factual and balanced is really important and we’ve [the City Council] seen the benefits of working with a wide range of stakeholders’ (Pb5). This approach facilitated more collaborative processes, greater capacity and meaningful decision-making, which is illustrative of living systems thinking (Principle 2) where reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships are nurtured (Bellato et al., 2022a). As illustrated by one public sector official, ‘prior to the pandemic we’d never had such a varied group come together and be more pragmatic’ (Pb4). Independent businesses described the TAB as ‘far more inclusive’ and ‘the voice of the sector’ (Pr4).

Whilst it was noted that the TAB 'could do with being a bit more agile' (Pr6), 'it's great that you've got a breadth of businesses represented, influencing policy' (Pr8). Another respondent commented that 'it's certainly been effective and not having the [DMO] chair it means that they [the DMO] have had to listen to the feedback coming from the business community' (Pr4).

Adopting a management approach that nurtures cooperation between stakeholder groups helps achieve equity and enhances democratic practice in destinations (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2019). In the case of York, the city has evolved new ways of engagement, which Mang & Haggard (2016, p.xvii) describe as enabling places to thrive and 'not just sustain a precarious balance' that embraces life's complexity 'as a source of innovation and evolution'.

Whilst it was apparent that stakeholder representation could be enhanced, the TAB offers a non-extractive socially just approach for moving beyond a neoliberal economic growth model in destination development (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). COVID-19 accelerated this model of active participation, providing a framework that enables 'stakeholders to co-create the future of tourism in York' (Pr5). Our research evidences how living systems thinking had percolated through, although not explicitly understood, to evolve a regenerative practice-led approach to tourism management. These early signs indicate hope for longer term ecological change and social justice when it comes to tourism policymaking and governance, validated by the recognition that it requires the 'willingness on the part of the local authority to step away from politics to make a process like this happen' (Pb3).

The importance of the TAB's role in transforming the city's tourism ecology was manifest through facilitating a voice for the independent business community. The TAB built capacity and catalysed the active stewardship of the city's tourism ecology to develop a new tourism strategy that supports collaborative action *with* local communities. Importantly, the tourism strategy formally recognises the importance of local knowledge and the unique potential of York's independent business community through engaging with traders' networks such as the Goodramgate Traders Association (established during the pandemic) and Indie York. These traders' associations have found a voice becoming central to the city's commerce and cultural life. Through active stewardship, these networks are formally represented within public authority business forums and policymaking and are a valued knowledge sharing network. This was illustrated by one respondent, who commented that, 'You're building this network, keeping in communication as to what's going on, and I think it's really important to have that community feeling' (Pr9).

This evidences active stewardship and a regenerative mindset that builds capacity to achieve collaborative action politically, socially and culturally to revitalise and nurture 'local natural resources and the community' (Pr2). Prior to the pandemic, Goodramgate, although within the city walls and near major city attractions, was marginalised and considered a 'forgotten street' (R3). However, the closure of major retailers in the city, accelerated by the pandemic, opened space for smaller traders, who quickly took advantage of this opportunity and began to colonise this neglected street. The independent businesses recognized the crucial role of networks to this spatial shift:

If you set up a small business, York is the place to do it because it has a healthy tourism environment but also we're so well supported by all of those different organizations in the city such as Visit York and Indie York (Pr6)

The integration and interconnections between traders' groups and the TAB's governance processes has harnessed inherent innovative capacity to transform city streets such as Goodramgate.

During the pandemic, the city council illustrated how it established processes of governance through 'consultations that have become better and more important' (Pb4), which has been harnessed through the TAB. What is emergent, although perhaps not formally recognized, is a living systems thinking approach that is creating a more balanced urban ecology that meets stakeholder needs where citizens are actively stewarding city life. When stakeholders work to serve broader social systems, it is proven to engender a net-positive effect and improve city social-ecological systems. Goodramgate is now thriving.

The pandemic proved that public finance is only one part of a solution and there was recognition that the city's infrastructure and public realm was less than adequate. Yet, collaborative action had proved that 'a city centre full of locals is a vibrant city centre, welcoming all' (Pr3). But these early signs are fragile and there needs to be recognition of the value of a wider milieu of socio-cultural activity. As one respondent described, public officials were now asking how the local authority could 'blur' the boundaries between public decision-making and how those decisions become enshrined in public policy, noting 'how can we [the local authority] enable public decision-making to translate through to executive decisions that would otherwise have happened behind closed doors' (Pb4). As Paddison & Hall (2022, p.8–9) identified, many local authorities economic development plans privilege 'high value sectors over tourism' that leads to 'uneven and ad-hoc geographical approaches to planning and development in the city creating spatial injustice associated with reduced social mobility and economic inequality'. Whilst not uncommon, this threatens the fragile regenerative development emerging in York's tourism policy and governance processes. Critically, York's future depends on respecting and recognising its unique qualities and learning from its community. This was evidenced by several respondents who noted that 'the future's bright in York, and we're going to shape it, rather than just letting it happen' (Pr2). If York can evolve its collaborative processes and recognise how living systems evolve, respecting local knowledge and practice, it has the potential to harness the power of regenerative tourism development and secure a sustainable future.

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand how tourism stakeholders collaborate towards the creation of practices that advance regenerative tourism, particularly in urban destinations (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Mathisen et al., 2022). The study identified how the pandemic catalysed living systems thinking and innovation through stakeholder collaboration that has supported a critical transformation of York's future beyond that of a tourist destination. Drawing upon Bellato et al.'s (2022a) conceptual

framework, a novel approach for researching the pre and post pandemic response in historic cities through regenerative tourism is offered. Critically, this study identified how destination stakeholders actively engaged in transformative regenerative tourism processes that emerged through living systems thinking. Importantly, our analysis highlights the implications tourism living systems thinking has for urban destination policymaking and management. It does so through identifying a city's unique potential and capability to lever stakeholder capacity and collaborative action. In York, this centred on a turn to localism which was catalysed through active stewardship manifest in traders' associations and policymaking forums such as the Tourism Advisory Board, which are underpinned by consciously valuing local cultural identity. What is apparent in the case of York is that tourism is being reimagined as a catalyst to the city's cultural revival, through enhanced connections that contribute to local initiatives and the development of community-based regeneration strategies (Duxbury et al., 2020).

Our research also identified that regeneration occurs not necessarily because those involved have applied a consciously regenerative 'approach' but have organically tapped into the unique potential of the place and local community in response to a crisis. York's response to the pandemic unlocked the inherent and unique potential of a diverse range of stakeholders through engaging them in policy and decision-making processes through the Tourism Advisory Board. Regenerative tourism is now a recognized policy instrument for achieving a cultural revival of local communities and city spaces by supporting community infrastructures. However, it is important to recognize that there is still a long way to go to achieve a holistic vision encompassed in Bellato et al.'s (2022a) framework.

Our research has wider implications for tourism geographies research, specifically issues of environment, space and place by understanding the importance of regenerative development as an alternative approach to urban design and governance. Our research adds to the growing tourism geography literature and the evolving tourism geography discourse that is engaging with regenerative development, particularly in understanding the diverse roles of tourism stakeholders and potential approaches to stakeholder engagement in regenerative development (Bellato et al., 2024; Pearson et al., 2024). Indeed, it should be recognized that regenerative tourism is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, each destination has its own contextual unique attributes and local community needs that will require adaptation to engage a range of stakeholders to work together to deliver desired regenerative tourism goals.

This study is not without its limitations. It is recognized that the use of a single case study is a limitation and may curtail the transferability of the research findings. A comparative case study approach might offer future studies wider scope. In addition, limitations associated with a small sample size and generalisability are recognized. However, interviews were conducted with respondents who were able to offer distinct, rich and informed insights into the issues under consideration. Indeed, this enabled deeper understanding of the complexities of regenerative tourism and highlights the power of living systems thinking as an approach to tourism in order to realise a more sustainable future.

Our research found that during the pandemic, communities galvanised, becoming active stewards of their city's tourism economy and ecology. What was apparent in York was a moment of regenerative development that transcended outdated

post-industrial regeneration policies of economic renewal. Reimagining the historic city as a site for tourism is urgently required if we are to secure the future of our most treasured historic, cultural and social spaces. The potential of regenerative approaches to tourism in urban cities offers an alternative to models predicated on neoliberal capitalism. This analysis demonstrates that by rebalancing power dynamics, local stakeholders can be empowered to actively engage in tourism development and policymaking that is sensitive to long term needs and sustainable tourism futures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Brendan Paddison is Associate Professor at York Business School, York St John University, UK. Brendan's main research interests include destination management, governance and development. Brendan co-chairs the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) and is Editor-in-chief for the *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*.

Jenny Hall is a cultural geographer interested in embodied experiences within tourism, adventure and heritage in the context of politics, gender, emotion and affect. Jenny has professional experience managing cultural regeneration projects in the public sector founding and leading major venues, festivals, and cultural development programmes.

ORCID

Brendan Paddison  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2896-2837>

Jenny Hall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5200-4308>

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