

Circular City Tourism: Defining Local Policies for Sustainable Tourism in Cities

Clara Benevolo and Renata Paola Dameri

Department of Economics and Business Studies, University of Genoa, Italy

benevolo@economia.unige.it

dameri@economia.unige.it

Abstract: Circular Economy is gaining momentum as a new economic paradigm able to couple economic development and environmental preservation. It reconceptualises the traditional take-make-waste production chain closing the loop to reduce a consumption of virgin raw materials and waste production and pollution. At the territorial level, cities are especially involved in the shifting from the linear to the circular paradigm, supporting the transition towards a circular economy. In defining their circular strategies, cities should consider the tourism sector and define ad hoc policies and tools to facilitate the transition towards circular tourism. Circular tourism is an emerging topic; at present, few scientific papers are available addressing this topic. Even fewer papers are available in the scientific literature about the circular city tourism, that is, the implementation of circular tourism in cities as part of a larger circular urban strategy. The present paper investigates the evolution of the circular tourism topic, considering the implementation of circular tourism local strategies at the urban level. Crossing scientific papers from three research fields – circular economy, circular city, and circular tourism –, the paper defines a framework for analysing urban policies for circular tourism integrated in larger circular city strategies.

Keywords: Circular economy, Circular city, Circular tourism, Sustainable tourism, City strategy

1. Introduction

Circular Economy (CE) is gaining momentum as a new economic paradigm able to couple economic development and environmental preservation (Homric et al, 2018; Sauvé, Bernard and Sloan, 2016; Walker et al, 2022). CE reconceptualises the traditional take-make-waste production chain closing the loop (Ghisellini, Cialani and Ulgiati, 2016): instead of disposal, materials are recovered, restored, reused, so that to reduce the consumption of virgin raw materials and, in the meantime, also reduce waste production and pollution (Korhonen et al, 2018; Laurenti et al, 2018).

From the beginning, CE has been conceptualised both in the public and the private sector (Velenturf and Purnell, 2021). At the territorial level, cities are especially involved in the shifting from the linear to the circular paradigm: indeed, some megatrends such as demographic growth, urbanisation, climate change, and the concentration of products consumption in urban areas are major drivers for cities to transition to a CE (Cohen and Munoz, 2016). Cities are also ideal places where to implement circular economy processes, as they have the right economic scale and density of people, firms, and materials; they can connect different stakeholders thanks to participated policy processes; they can incorporate circular processes into local public services; and can use policies and tools such as regulations, incentives, taxation, to support the transition towards a CE (Petit-Boix and Leipold, 2018).

It is important to identify sectors holding the highest potential for the CE to maximise the impact deriving from the shift towards the circular economy paradigm (Bicket et al, 2014): in almost all cities, such sectors are especially waste management, food and beverage distribution and consumption, construction and demolition (Bellezoni et al, 2022). However, also tourism is a sector potentially significant, especially for tourist cities, where overtourism and seasonal peaks of tourists produce a strong environmental impact. In defining their circular strategies, cities should consider the tourism sector and define ad hoc policies and tools to facilitate the transition towards circular tourism (Camilleri et al, 2021).

Circular tourism is an emerging topic in research and empirical activities (Fusco Girard and Nocca, 2017); at present, few scientific papers are available addressing this topic. Even fewer papers are available in the scientific literature about the circular city tourism, that is, the implementation of circular tourism in cities as part of a larger circular urban strategy.

The present paper investigates the evolution of the circular tourism topic, considering the implementation of circular tourism local strategies at the urban level. The research question is: what local policies are established by businesses and local authorities to activate circular tourism in urban tourism destinations? Crossing scientific papers from three research fields – circular economy, circular city, and circular tourism –, the paper defines a framework for analysing urban policies for circular tourism integrated in larger circular city strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Circular Economy

Define CE is not easy; even if the topic is gaining momentum, there are too many definitions, and a shared one has not yet to arise (Kircherr, Reike and Hekkert, 2017).

CE aims to link environmental preservation to economic development (Ghisellini, Cialani and Ulgiati, 2016), finding new business models and behaviours to reduce materials consumption, waste and pollution through new production and distribution processes. The change regards the whole value chain, transforming it from the traditional linear model to the circular model, closing the loop through the re-entering of discarded materials into the production process.

The international scientific literature has stated that it is not enough to work at the end of life of products, but it is necessary to redesign products and processes to conceive circular goods (Korhonen et al, 2018; Domenech and Bahn-Walkowiak, 2019). For this reason, the framework of circular principles should cover the whole value chain as an umbrella, from the design of new products to their end-of-life, which becomes a new life thanks to closed loops (Homrich et al, 2018). Following these concepts, the CE framework can be effectively summarised in three macro-principles defined as follows:

REUSE: it means to close the loop implementing operations able to reuse the residual value in end-of-life products, reused as an input in further production processes (Lieder and Rashid, 2016).

LONG-USE: it means to extend the products' lifetime as much as possible, as they remain in the production-distribution-use cycle instead of being discarded as waste (Elia, Gnoni and Tornese, 2017).

DESIGN: it means to completely redesign products and processes as they consume fewer virgin natural resources or energy, using as input recycled materials or energy from renewable sources; circular products should be conceived to be long used, supporting their repairability, modularity, and the second-hand market. Such products contain materials and parts that are easy to be reused when the product ends its life (Bocken et al, 2016).

Moreover, the efficacy of CE depends on the capacity of change of all the economic actors; indeed, the successful CE transition is realised by all the actors concurrently (Ghisellini, Cialani and Ulgiati, 2016):

- Businesses that gradually move towards circular business models, products, and processes (Lewandoski, 2016).
- Consumers that gradually adopt circular lifestyles, preferring goods conceived for long use and re-use (Moggi and Dameri, 2021).
- The public administration – both central and local government – plays the role of regulation, support, incentive, and fiscal policy, oriented towards CE (Camilleri, 2021).

2.2 Circular Economy In City

During the latest years, private and public actors have been increasing their commitment to CE to fight against climate change (Walker et al, 2022). Especially the governments of the most industrialised countries have been starting to develop long-term strategic plans to enforce the transition from a linear to a CE (Domenech and Bahn-Walcowiak, 2019). Policy-makers' role in supporting CE can be observed at different government levels.

At the local level, both regional and municipal governments are adopting local rules, plans, and fiscal acts to support and exploit the transition towards CE; for example:

- Amsterdam, considered the pioneer city in CE, issued the Amsterdam Circular 2020-2025 Strategy, based on the Amsterdam City Doughnut inspired at the Doughnut economy paradigm (Raworth, 2017);
- Barcelona issued the Circular Economy Promotion Programme AMB Circular (2019);
- Copenhagen issued the Circular Copenhagen: Resource and Waste Management Plan 2024, more focused on materials than on CE;
- London defined the London's Circular Economy Route Map (2019).

Cities are arising as a vocational place where to implement circular economy strategies and actions (Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation, 2017) for both their problems and capabilities.

At the beginning of the new millennium, cities showed many problems, both environmental – pollution, waste, higher and higher need for energy and food to nurture the city, its inhabitants, and activities – and social ones – crowding, inequalities, unemployment, difficulties in answering to the citizens' and community's needs through sustainable services. Therefore, especially the largest cities worldwide have embarked on a virtuous path facing socio-environmental problems, applying their planning and regulatory capabilities. Circular economy strategies are one of the topics by which cities pursue better wealth for all, safeguarding the environment (Fusco Girard and Nocca, 2017).

Mapping urban activities shows that some are considerable for the CE (Papageorgiou et al, 2021).

- Soil, water, energy, and food consumption is very high in cities.
- Mobility and building are the main source of pollution and greenhouse gases emission.
- The city produces a huge quantity of waste, which is hard to manage.

Moreover:

- Several activities very considerable for CE implementation are directly managed by Municipalities or Municipality-owned companies, such as local public transport, water, and waste management.
- Municipalities govern urban planning – and therefore soil consumption and building – and define local policies about the territorial implementation about CE.

Cities are, therefore, both polluting subjects and ideal places where to implement CE (Petit-Boix and Leopold, 2018), thanks to the city's capability to define and realize CE strategic plans.

2.3 Circular Tourism in Cities

In countries with a high rate of urbanisation, cities play a very important economic and social role. They often become tourist destinations due to their historical, cultural, artistic, religious, and social resources. Based on geographical, economic, and social criteria, it is possible to identify different patterns of tourism development in cities (Lozato-Giotart, 1993) involving different impacts in terms of resource consumption and levels of sustainability. Especially in urban areas, tourism can cause a strong environmental impact and tourism issue is closely linked to sustainability.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO, 2023), sustainable tourism “takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Circular tourism can help to generate and develop more sustainable tourism overcoming the traditional paradigm of tourism as an extractive industry (Cerreta et al, 2020) and developing business models based on sustainable principles (Fusco Girard and Nocca, 2017). The literature shows that the theme of circular tourism is often associated with sustainable tourism (Jones and Wynn, 2018). Circular tourism is of great interest within the social science disciplines, but still need to be investigated and deepened adequately. Also, the operational practices of circular tourism are very fragmented, and the literature is often based on case analyses stand-alone (Bosone and Nocca, 2022; Cerreta et al, 2020).

Tourism in cities intertwines with all the key topics of the CE as previously described:

- tourism increases water, energy, food, and beverage consumption;
- it strongly impacts the environment owing to greenhouse gases emission deriving from tourists' mobility and non-circular accommodation;
- tourists produce a huge amount of waste.

To face the environmental impact of tourism and drive the migration from linear to circular tourism, Municipalities can include tourism in their vertical plans regarding each topic, such as waste management, water management, mobility, and so on, or define a circular tourism strategy crossing the vertical topics.

Moreover, the Municipalities should consider the role of all the actors. Rodriguez, Florido and Jacob (2020) state that “circular tourism implies a model in which each tourism actor (tourist, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), suppliers - hotels, restaurants, etc. -, and resident population) adopts an eco-friendly approach” based on the principle of “closing the life cycle” of products, services, waste, materials, water and energy, and reconsidering waste as a new resource for the city-system (Cerreta et al, 2020). Accordingly, for this research at the city level, we applied the traditional tourist research perspective that distinguishes three areas of study: tourism demand, tourism supply and public entities (with competencies in cities and tourism).

1. Tourists are significant stakeholders in promoting and maintaining destination sustainability (Rudan, Nižić and Grdić, 2021). “Tourists are co-producers, co-performers, and co-creators of tourism experiences, and therefore, their choices and activities can move the Travel & Tourism sector towards a circular economy” (WTTC, 2022).
2. Managers of tourist attractions and firms (such as travel & tourism companies) are the fundamental operators of the supply side. The tourism industry is not a homogenous sector: among tourism enterprises, we distinguish those directly involved in tourism and those whose services are also intended for non-tourists (residents or excursionists) (allied or related industries). Tourism enterprises can be central and strategic players in any urban policy for circular tourism and must integrate elements of the CE into their business models (Jones and Wynn, 2018).
3. At the city level, destination management and tourism policies are often entrusted to a public agency (tourism department or destination management organization). However, circular city tourism should be part of the city's more general local strategy to develop the transition towards the CE.

Until now, few publications have shown the light on how Municipalities plan and implement circular tourism policies, but it is possible to use the literature to define a framework by which to analyse different types of sources – theoretical papers, case studies, and empirical reports – and design a taxonomy of urban policies for circular tourism, considering both the different topics and the role of all the actors.

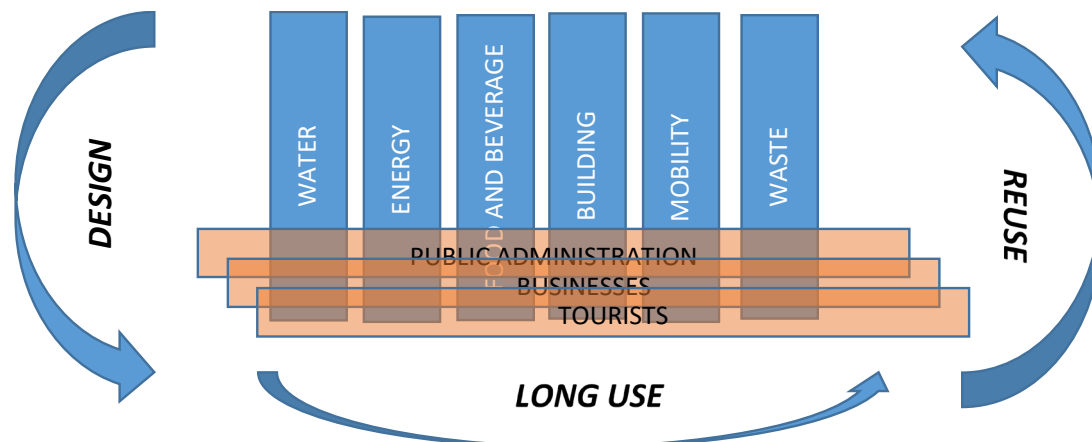
3. The Conceptual Framework of the Literature Overview

To analyse the literature, the authors defined a framework to collect and classify the papers, identifying the main topics regarding the CE in cities and the circular tourism. Indeed, not all the topics regarding CE are relevant at the urban scale; and the local CE policies are different with respect to the national or regional ones (Petit-Boix and Leipold, 2018). Moreover, circular tourism addresses not all the aspects of CE but the ones linked to the environmental impact of tourism (Cerreta et al, 2020).

The more relevant urban topics for circular tourism have been grouped and classified into categories reflecting the intertwinements between the city circularity and the urban policies aiming at circular tourism.

Assuming that implementing circular tourism needs the active involvement of all the economic actors, the analysis should pay attention to their role in each circular topic. Therefore, the relevant urban topics have been intertwined with the role of each different actor.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework deriving from this analysis.



Source: The authors

Figure 1: The Circular City Tourism Framework

The columns represent the main urban topics interconnected with tourism. They regard:

- the higher resource consumption produced by the touristic fluxes in the city – water, energy, food and beverage; and the consequent need to define circular tourism processes to prevent this consumption;
- the pollution generated by tourists’ mobility and hospitality;

- the need to address public and private transport and accommodation sites toward circular practices;
- the huge waste generated by tourists, and the consequent need to develop policies and campaign to create awareness and a more sustainable behaviour in all the actors involved in the urban touristic system.

Columns cross with rows, representing the actors involved in the urban touristic system. They are:

- The tourist that, on one side, consume resources and produce pollution and waste, and, on another side, sometimes prefers green or circular destinations;
- The firms, here conceived as the tourism sector, called to contribute to the circularity of the city with their virtuous choices and behaviours;
- The public administration, and in the present case the Municipality, implementing local policies to favour and realize tourism circularity in the urban area.

Every cell can contain one or more urban actions to implement circular tourism. The framework permits the creation of links between circular tourism and other circular strategies in cities; for example, circular mobility is an important urban strategy that regards not only – but also – tourism and all the actions in the same topic must be harmonised. The framework is also a tool to define a comprehensive circular tourism strategy in cities, involving all the relevant topics and all the economic actors. And finally, the framework is also a useful taxonomy to analyse the existing scientific literature about urban policies for circular tourism – if any!

4. Methodology

The present paper is based on literature analysis, focusing on circular tourism in cities, mainly aiming at classifying circular city tourism actions and policies. The procedure is based on two steps: paper searching and text coding.

In the first step – paper searching, to extract the relevant papers, for the first the authors searched the Scopus database on January 2023. The chosen keywords were “tourism”, “circular”, and “city” in the title, keywords, and abstract of the papers. This extraction produced a sample of 63 papers.

In the second step, the authors read the abstract of all the papers to analyse them, applying a two-level coding system.

The first level of coding aimed to select only the papers relevant for the research; codes regard the research aims and perimeter, they are:

- circular city tourism, and
- urban policies.

The first-level coding framework includes the following codes:

- circularity
- tourism
- city, urban areas

combined with:

- plans
- policies
- actions
- programs
- projects.

After applying the first level coding, only 28 papers were relevant to the aims of the research.

The second level of coding aimed to classify the urban circular tourism policies, considering the main topics of CE in cities and the actor of circular tourism.

The second level of coding included the following codes:

- topics, such as
- *water*
- *energy*

- *food and beverage*
- *building*
- *mobility*
- *waste*

combined with

- actors, they are:
- *public administration agencies*
- *businesses*
- *tourists*.

The coding framework is then used to code the contents of the 28 papers selected previously.

5. Findings: Local Policies for Circular Tourism

The 28 papers relevant to the research aims (due to length constraints, the list is available on request) show a limited picture both on horizontal and vertical themes.

Touristification and over-tourism seriously affect the environment, the resident population, and the city's liveability. The relevant impact of tourism flows and business activities in the city is the theme of most papers, and the CE model seems to be the all-embracing answer to these problems. However, there are no comprehensive studies or integrated models on implementing a CE strategy at the industry level, and only a few vertical themes are considered.

The main urban topic interconnected with tourism present in the papers is that of waste. The impact of waste in cities is a strongly felt problem, and the presence of tourists makes this problem more critical and relevant for destinations with a higher degree of attractiveness. The objectives of recycling or zero waste and eco-efficiency assessment are crucial in a city, especially where the significance of tourist flows makes this problem more crucial at certain times of the year (due to the seasonality of tourism or event-related tourism). Attempts to measure this impact are presented, but articulate proposals for solutions or policies for the circular city are lacking.

Another theme is the built heritage and its reuse chance (e.g., the fortresses and the built cultural heritage in spa towns): cultural heritage conservation/valorisation can be an investment and not a cost, and the abandoned built heritage can represent a strategic resource, a space of opportunity for constructing territorial capital. Reuse practices can contribute to the innovation of social relations towards a circular transition, the urban regeneration, and the development of the city's tourist attractiveness. It is necessary to integrate these practices in a strategic and integrated vision with the other themes (such as energy efficiency in buildings, and increasing in the efficiency of the building materials, in particular in accommodation buildings) that are missing in the literature analysed.

The third vertical theme is food but, even though food has the greatest impact on urban waste and energy and land consumption, only some papers address this topic with reference to tourism. Some papers identify tools to reduce consumption or waste, promote zero-kilometre products, maintain and reuse goods, and activate the circle. Only one paper focuses on a sustainable value chain of food in the hospitality business: it suggests preventative measures (sustainable menus, responsible production, and consumption) and recycling practices (recycling surplus and food waste). The production and consumption of food in the tourism sector is not integrated into the environmentally sustainable food consumption framework.

Other vertical themes (water, energy, and mobility) are missing, and there is very little insight into the role of technology: a comprehensive city organization and an integrated plan for tourism in a circular city is necessary.

Our city circular tourism framework represents the actors involved in the urban touristic system and each cell identifies a possible urban action to implement circular tourism.

Only two papers focus on traveller and tourist behaviour and co-responsibility to be an "active and responsible traveller" (Bosone and Nocca, 2022, p. 9). Tourists' role in supporting and promoting CE is generally underestimated or missing. Some papers state that, concerning tourists, it is necessary to adopt tools to certify the tourist destination, communicate the strategy, and give tools for tourists to become protagonists and co-producers of CE. However, value proposition and customer relationships topics (WTTC, 2022) are missing.

The papers focused on the supply-side address the environmental impact of business activities, identify the role of companies, and propose new business models that are more sustainable and circular. Waste-focused papers identify hotels, hosts of non-hotel tourist facilities, and restaurants to be entrusted with roles of implementation and responsibility for waste containment practices, separate waste collection, and so on. However, the tourist-hotel relationship in activating virtuous circles in waste management, energy use, and urban transport is not identified as strategic.

Only a few papers refer to policies, so the role of municipalities has yet to emerge since city initiatives are usually reported on non-peer-reviewed platforms (Petit-Boix and Leipold, 2018). Some authors suggest strategic planning and a decision support system, and state that “the circular city cannot be considered as a simple sum of urban circular economy projects, but it is linked to a systemic vision of the city as a ‘complex system’” (Bosone and Nocca, 2021, p. 41). However, an articulate proposal of a CE for tourist cities still needs to be developed.

In every territorial policy for sustainability, stakeholders' role, and mind-set are crucial. The CE can be a driver to sustainability and stakeholders' collaboration and involvement plays an important role; however, it needs specific frameworks, deliberate strategies, and appropriate tools consistent with the meaning and objectives of circular city tourism. Some authors suggest an integrated and multi-level approach to urban transformation. However, a multistakeholder approach is needed that includes local people (such as building owners), businesses, local governments, tourist boards and associations. In particular, “all stakeholders have to transform from passive consumers to active participants” (Nižić, Grdić and Zamlić, 2022, p. 97), and, in this way, circular tourism can also be a response to more general city issues (social and housing).

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Further Works

Tourism arises as an important aspect of CE in cities, owing its heavy impact on environmental preservation and quality of life in urban areas. However, the available scientific literature includes few papers facing circular tourism in cities, and fewer papers regard how municipalities define and implement circular tourism plans actions, and policies. The topic is still immature, and it will probably develop in the future, considering that the majority of papers dated in the latest three years.

The survey especially reveals that an integrated view lacks, including circular tourism in comprehensive city strategic plans, involving all the actors and stakeholders in a collaborative way, despite the more general literature about circular economy clearly states that an integrated and participated approach is crucial for the successful transition toward a circular city.

The present work designs a theoretical framework describing the multidimensional nature of circular city tourism, crossing crucial topics with the role of all the actors – tourists, businesses, and public bodies; even if at present the framework is quite empty and it contains only very few actions and projects, it is an useful instrument of analysis and will be enriched in the future.

As outlined by Petit-Boix and Leipold (2018) few scientific papers address the circular city topic, especially regarding empirical implementation, because cities publish their plans in non-scientific articles and reports. This is a limitation of the present paper, as it does not include the survey of other sources than scientific papers. Further works will include reports and non-scientific articles in our survey, to enlarge the research perimeter. It will be useful also to validate the theoretical framework, the main contribute of the present paper to the literature about circular city tourism.

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