

Guest editorial: Overcoming overtourism? Proximity-based tourism, cultural heritage and bottom-up place-based innovation

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1. Introduction

Overtourism has become one of the most evident manifestations of the contradictions inherent in contemporary tourism development and is increasingly a topic of discussion not only in tourism studies but also in the broader debate on urban studies (among others: [Calle-Vaquero et al., 2020](#); [Dodds and Butler, 2019a](#); [Pasquinelli and Trunfio, 2020](#)). It is a global and profoundly multifaceted phenomenon. On the one hand, the growing “Instagrammability” and circulation of places framed as “iconic” have had an increasingly powerful impact on tourist imaginaries and desires ([Unger and Grassi, 2020](#)). On the other hand, the economic infrastructure underpinning tourism has been radically transformed in recent years by new forms of hospitality and by the platformisation of short-term rentals ([Hall et al., 2022](#)). Together with the accommodation models enabled by platforms such as Airbnb, this has contributed to the gradual erosion of the residential housing stock, which is being transformed into tourist assets, thereby intensifying conflicts relating to housing, liveability and the right to the city. Drawing on Harvey’s (2017) notion of “accumulation by dispossession”, the platformisation of short-term rentals can be interpreted as part of a broader transformation through which residential housing and everyday urban life are converted into rent-generating tourist assets. This dynamic has been discussed through the concept of “Airbnbification”, which extends debates on gentrification to the specific effects of platform-mediated tourist accommodation ([Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018](#); [Mermet, 2022](#)). Even the walls of many cities around the world bear witness to this increasingly evident tension ([Bragaglia, 2024](#)) between the everyday lives of residents and the temporary presence of tourists (Figure 1).

In this special issue, we seek to argue that, to address the phenomenon of overtourism, it is necessary to move beyond a narrow perspective focused exclusively on visitor numbers and instead adopt a broader approach capable of capturing the governance mechanisms, cultural practices and innovative processes through which tourism is not only generated but also challenged and rethought. The concept of overtourism therefore seeks to shed light on the blind spots of an unsustainable tourism model – specifically, the current form of tourism capitalism, whose expansionary dynamics increasingly challenge conventional governance arrangements ([Bianchi and Milano, 2024](#); [Bianchi and Shand, 2026](#)).

Although the term is often associated with an excessive number of visitors to iconic destinations, its meaning goes beyond overcrowding ([Dodds and Butler, 2019a](#)). For this reason, tackling overtourism does not merely mean proposing solutions aimed at limiting the number of tourists (for example, city entry taxes, as introduced by the City of Venice) or restricting certain forms of tourism and their impacts on the city (as has happened in the cases of Barcelona, Amsterdam and New York regarding the restriction of short-term rentals, to name a few). Although these tools and strategies may prove crucial in specific contexts, they are far from being a panacea, as they do not truly address the structural conditions through which tourism transforms housing, public space, cultural heritage and everyday life into



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Figure 1. Graffiti protesting against overtourism in various cities
Note: From left to right: Girona (Spain), Venice (Italy), and Palermo (Italy)
Source: Francesca Bragaglia

resources to be exploited. In this sense, “overcoming overtourism” requires a re-evaluation of the structural forces that are progressively leading tourism to be regarded as one of the main forms of urban extractivism. To propose a transition towards models of tourism based on local ties and the active involvement of local communities, we must first ask ourselves who benefits from the current state of affairs and how to conceive of alternative models of governance. International debates tend to frame overtourism primarily as a challenge of multi-level, multi-stakeholder governance and as a policy problem requiring new urban tourism strategies beyond growth-oriented destination management (Dodds and Butler, 2019b; Koens *et al.*, 2021; Nientied and Toto, 2020; Pechlaner *et al.*, 2019). This special issue takes this concern as its starting point, but shifts the discussion towards the need for a transition. If overtourism lays bare the limitations of a tourism sector driven by attractions and geared towards growth, then the question is not merely how to manage tourist pressure more efficiently but above all how to rethink the relationship between tourism, communities and places. For this reason, this special issue devotes particular attention to cultural heritage and place-based social innovation, not as separate themes, but as two fundamental dimensions through which to foster forms of community-based tourism, where civic actors can potentially act as co-producers of innovative culturally-based heritage practices (Tricarico *et al.*, 2023). On the one hand, cultural heritage is central because it can be mobilised both as an extractive resource within tourism economies and as a basis for community-based practices rooted in local histories, tangible and intangible heritage, rituals, itineraries, festivals, cultural landscapes and everyday practices (Kanellopoulou *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, this special issue aims to focus on the role of residents – those who experience these places on a daily basis – to move beyond the view of them as passive spectators and victims of overtourism. Instead, overcoming overtourism requires a more nuanced understanding of residents as potential co-producers of meanings, heritage practices and place-based innovation. It also requires new forms of socially innovative collaboration capable of addressing unmet needs (Bragaglia, 2021; Tricarico *et al.*, 2022a), new organisational models and new ways of involving communities in tourism decision-making.

In discussing experiences of proximity-based tourism, however, this special issue seeks to avoid a romanticised view that would treat proximity as a new panacea. Proximity-based tourism may reduce travel distance, but it does not necessarily reduce tourism’s negative externalities. The risk is that it becomes a softened vocabulary for redistributing visitor pressure without altering the underlying logics that produced overtourism in the first place. In this sense, the contributions gathered in this special issue ask whether proximity-based tourism can offer a credible pathway for overcoming overtourism and under what conditions.

2. Proximity-based tourism and bottom-up approaches: a long and winding road

The notion of proximity tourism emerged at the margins of tourism studies as an attempt to unsettle the discipline's constitutive assumption that travel is defined by distance and difference (Díaz-Soria and Llurdés-Coit, 2013). Rather than treating the tourist as someone who necessarily crosses long distances to consume the exotic, the concept foregrounds the possibility of reinterpreting familiar and nearby places through a tourist gaze, shortening the physical and cultural distance between visitor and destination. Early formulations framed proximity tourism primarily as a strategy for local development in vulnerable destinations, and subsequent work has documented its capacity to redistribute cultural participation and sustain local amenities, for instance through instruments such as regional museum cards (Bertacchini *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated both the practice and its vocabulary, as constrained mobility redirected attention towards domestic and regional travel and towards a language of resilience and "building back better" (Balan and Escobar, 2024).

This trajectory, however, has not been linear, and the enthusiasm surrounding proximity warrants analytical caution. Reducing the distance travelled does not, in itself, alter the structural logics that produced overtourism. Proximity can operate as a softened vocabulary for redistributing visitor pressure across wider territories without questioning who controls the circuits through which places are converted into rent or where the resulting value accumulates. Reading through Harvey's (2017) notion of accumulation by dispossession, the platformisation of hospitality has shown how residential fabric and everyday life can be absorbed into tourist economies irrespective of the scale at which tourism operates. The analytically relevant question is therefore not the distance covered by the visitor but the governance arrangement that distributes costs and benefits, and the extent to which residents participate in decisions rather than merely absorbing their externalities (Astore and Tricarico, 2026). Framed in these terms, extractivism is not a property of long-haul tourism alone. It is a possible outcome of any tourism configuration, proximity included, whenever the direction of value capture is left ungoverned.

It is at this point that bottom-up approaches and the literature on social innovation become pertinent. Social innovation has been theorised as the reconfiguration of social relations through the satisfaction of unmet needs and the empowerment of actors previously excluded from decision-making (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013), and it has circulated widely, at times uncritically, as a policy device (Tricarico *et al.*, 2022b). Applied to tourism, this perspective shifts the unit of analysis from the visitor to the relations of production and governance that organise a destination, reframing residents not as passive hosts but as potential co-producers of meanings, heritage practices and services. What matters is the distinction between tourism done to places and tourism produced with and by them. This resonates with the place-based approach to territorial development, which holds that the mobilisation of underused local resources depends on institutional arrangements sensitive to context rather than on standardised, place-neutral prescriptions (Barca *et al.*, 2012). Culture and the arts occupy an ambivalent position within this frame, since urban cultural policies may mobilise them as engines of place-based development while also exposing them to contested forms of governance, value extraction and uneven urban benefit (Gilmore and Burnill-Maier, 2025). The bottom-up label does not resolve this ambivalence. Community participation has itself been criticised for privileging selected local voices and for adopting a business-oriented understanding of "community" that leaves wider social asymmetries intact (Blackstock, 2005; Tricarico, 2017). Bottom-up is a description of a process, not a guarantee of an outcome.

These questions acquire particular salience in inner and rural territories, which form the backdrop against which much of the current experimentation is taking place. Here, the point

of departure is often demographic decline and the erosion of essential services, conditions frequently read as marginality but more accurately understood as the outcome of a position assigned within wider spatial and economic hierarchies rather than as an intrinsic property of place (Bock, 2016). Bock's (2016) notion of nexogenous development is instructive, as it locates the potential of marginal areas neither in purely endogenous resources nor in exogenous intervention, but in the capacity to reconnect local assets to external networks on renegotiated terms. Within this frame, tourism intersects with a broader search for residentiality, understood here as the set of social, material and institutional conditions that make peripheral places liveable, inhabitable and chosen rather than merely visited. Recent evidence from culture-led interventions in the central Apennines of Italy shows how cultural entrepreneurship, participatory governance and residency programmes can catalyse measurable neo-population processes in demographically declining villages (Spadano and Sacco, 2026). Comparable dynamics can be observed in small inner-area municipalities in the Daunian sub-Apennines where community cooperatives have assumed custodianship of local assets and coupled community-run enterprises with forms of slow, place-based tourism, redistributing the proceeds of the visitor economy through reinvestment in services and employment (Gravagnuolo *et al.*, 2026). Experiences of this kind suggest that the durability of such arrangements depends less on the volume of visitors than on the strength of the organisations that govern them. This connects to a wider cultural reappraisal of staying, articulated in Italy through the notion of *restanza* as a deliberate and generative act rather than a residual condition (Teti, 2022), and increasingly echoed at the European level in an emerging vocabulary of the right to remain in one's own territory.

These strands do not compose a settled picture, and their analytical interest lies precisely in the tensions they hold. Proximity reduces the distance of travel but not necessarily its extractive charge. Participation redistributes voice, yet it can also formalise the capture of decision-making by the more organised segments of a community. The search for residentiality makes peripheral places liveable and chosen rather than merely visited, but the arrival of new inhabitants can reconfigure local hierarchies as readily as it can reverse decline. Cultural heritage sits at the centre of this ambivalence, mobilised at once as a living practice that reproduces community and as a representation staged for the visiting gaze. Social innovation compounds the difficulty rather than resolving it, as the same collaborative arrangements that address unmet needs can also absorb functions withdrawn by public institutions, so that community self-organisation shades into a privatisation of welfare by other means. What connects these tensions is organisational and temporal rather than thematic. It concerns whether such arrangements consolidate into institutions capable of outlasting the project cycles and funding streams on which they initially depend, or dissolve once external support is withdrawn and leave the underlying asymmetries untouched. It is within this unresolved field, rather than in any settled resolution of it, that the contributions to this special issue intervene.

3. The contribution of this special issue to the debate

The articles in this special issue analyse proximity-based tourism using various methodologies and across different empirical contexts, including Brazil, Taiwan, France, Italy and trans-European cultural routes. This wealth of experience goes beyond individual case studies, as three distinct themes can be identified: the governance of tourism development; the role of cultural heritage in place-based innovation; and the capacity of local actors to redistribute value, as well as to give voice and autonomy to counter-hegemonic practices. Indeed, some of the contributions highlight the role of organisational and cultural

conditions that make it possible to co-create tourism alongside local stakeholders, instead of simply imposing it upon them.

The paper “Social innovation in tourism: organisational intermediation through participatory governance for sustainable destination development” ([Maiurro et al., 2026](#)) examines organisational intermediation through the case of Raízes Desenvolvimento Sustentável in Brazil. It discusses how a social enterprise can act as a mediator between community associations, private actors and public institutions and how this can serve as a catalyst for participatory governance and active listening. In this sense, this contribution demonstrates that overcoming overtourism does not merely mean limiting tourist pressure but also reconfiguring power relations in destination governance. Moreover, social innovation emerges here as a practical mechanism through which communities can become protagonists rather than passive recipients of tourism development.

The paper “Arts-based methods for place-based innovation and affective activation in rural areas: a film residency in Cassine” ([Leonardi and Dubini, 2026](#)) explores the Duemila30 Film Residency as a participatory cultural process in a rural context. The article focuses its attention on the affective and relational process through which residents and filmmakers co-create meanings tied to the place. This contribution shows how cultural practices can open up alternatives to commodified forms of tourism. The residency is not presented as a tool to make Cassine more attractive in the conventional sense of tourism marketing, but as a process that activates a sense of place, community reflection and new visions of local development.

The paper “Place and mobility in Italian artist residencies: towards an analytical framework” ([Landolfo and Tricarico, 2026](#)) expands on this discussion by proposing an analytical framework for understanding residencies as place-based cultural practices. It provides an overview of Italian residencies through ministerial programmes, foreign academies and grassroots initiatives in peripheral areas. The paper adopts a critical approach and does not regard artist residencies as inherently beneficial to the host territories. They can create the conditions for mutual engagement, but they can also perpetuate cultural exploitation or institutional isolation if they remain disconnected from place-based strategies. In this sense, the work of Tricarico and Landolfo contributes to a more nuanced understanding of cultural mobility as a possible, yet ambivalent, alternative to tourist consumption.

The paper “Can cultural participation enhance proximity tourism? Insights from a resident profiling study” ([Montalto, 2026](#)) shifts the analytical focus from community as an abstract category to the differentiated profiles, perceptions and cultural practices of residents. The paper is based on the case study of Limoges, in France, a medium-sized city that has recently developed a proximity tourism strategy. Through resident profiling, the article examines how the perceived image of the place and cultural participation are related to willingness to support tourism development. This contribution is particularly relevant because it challenges the assumption that residents constitute a homogeneous community. Different groups of residents perceive places differently, participate in cultural life differently and support tourism development to varying degrees. For local authorities, this means that local tourism strategies must be based on the diversity of residents rather than on abstract appeals to the “community”.

A third group of contributions explores the territorial dimension of proximity-based tourism, analysing how itineraries, site-specific festivals, as well as redeveloped cultural heritage sites and shrinking villages, can serve as platforms for alternative forms of local development.

The paper “Symbiosis between pilgrimage routes and nearby cultural heritage in Europe: which lessons are learned?” ([Andrade-Suárez et al., 2026](#)) examines the relationship between cultural routes and the surrounding rural heritage through the “*ruAllure*” project. The article addresses a fundamental challenge in the debate on how to overcome overtourism and how to link existing mobility flows with the surrounding areas without merely creating new forms of pressure. By focusing on pilgrimage routes, lesser-known heritage sites and rural areas, the article demonstrates how slow mobility can support territorial development when integrated with local planning, stakeholder coordination and heritage enhancement.

The paper “Bricolage and proximity tourism in regional revitalisation: cultural asset regeneration at Taiwan’s Yuejin Lantern Festival” ([Yang and Yang, 2026](#)) explores how grassroots actors mobilise heritage, creativity and limited resources to support wider revitalisation. Drawing on the concepts of “bricolage” and “cultural asset regeneration”, this work develops a Discovery–Evaluation–Exploitation cycle that captures how grassroots actors recombine tangible and intangible resources over time. In this sense, the Yuejin Lantern Festival in Tainan (Taiwan) illustrates how proximity-based tourism can mitigate some of the dynamics associated with overtourism, particularly volume-oriented attraction strategies, when it is based on adaptive reuse, community participation and local identity.

Finally, the paper “Assessing tourism-led initiatives in shrinking villages: towards a qualitative framework beyond urban-centric and growth-oriented perspectives” ([Astore, 2026](#)) contributes to this debate by developing a qualitative, actor-centred framework to assess whether community-based and rural tourism can foster multidimensional resilience in Italian villages experiencing demographic decline. Building on the concept of territorial capital, the article moves beyond competitiveness and short-term economic outcomes, asking whether tourism initiatives can support the collective reproduction of local resources over time. Its contribution is particularly significant because it redefines tourism development in marginal areas not as a compensatory strategy for places excluded from traditional tourist circuits, but as a matter of long-term territorial resilience.

These articles offer a comprehensive yet highly coherent contribution to the current debate on the urgent need to find solutions to the problem of overtourism. They also make it clear that proximity-based tourism should not be regarded as a universal or one-size-fits-all model; rather, it encompasses experiences that are intrinsically place- and people-based. Indeed, this special issue is far from treating proximity-based tourism as a panacea. Instead, it seeks to critically examine it as a possible solution under specific conditions. In this sense, the articles in this special issue go beyond an idealised vision of proximity-based tourism, making it clear that its transformative potential depends essentially on the way in which tourism is integrated into local institutions, cultural practices, resident participation and, above all, long-term territorial strategies. The collective contribution of this special issue therefore lies in shifting the debate from the spatial redistribution of visitors to the reorganisation of relationships between forms of tourism, specific places and local communities. In some cases, this reorganisation takes place through territorial capital and resilience; in others, through social innovation, cultural participation and artistic practice; and in yet others, through pilgrimage routes, festivals or forms of adaptive reuse. What these contributions have in common is an interest in understanding whether tourism can be managed in ways that do not reproduce the dynamics of exploitation, commodification and exclusion associated with the overtourism we are currently experiencing.

4. Conclusions

What the contributions to this special issue share, read together, is not a single verdict on proximity-based tourism but a recurring pattern of conflation. A destination can succeed in

limiting exposure without altering who captures the resulting value; it can redistribute revenue without changing who is able to remain in or move to the place; and it can attract new inhabitants without disturbing the extractive logics that produced overtourism in the first place. These are three distinct governance problems, addressed by three distinct sets of instruments and their frequent conflation is, we suggest, one of the more consequential blind spots in current debate.

This has direct implications for the research agenda that follows from this special issue. First, work is needed that treats volume control, value redistribution and residency reconfiguration as analytically separable variables rather than as a single index of “sustainable” tourism, so that their interaction, where they reinforce one another and where they substitute for one another, can be specified rather than assumed. Second, it is advisable to incorporate place-based solutions into an operational approach capable of counterbalancing the current market-oriented *laissez-faire* approach (Peeters *et al.*, 2018; Mihalic, 2016). From urban contexts to cultural landscapes (Aimar, 2023), communities should be more closely involved in the decision-making process aimed at jointly managing and addressing tourism and its impacts by providing advice and proposing solutions regarding tourist-oriented decisions regulated by public bodies. This is a multilevel, multiscale approach, where it is recommended that endogenous, context-specific strategies and actions be designed with local populations, which may intersect with one another over time. However, the durability of bottom-up and community-based arrangements once the initial project cycle or political attention has passed remains largely undocumented; longitudinal research, rather than further snapshot case studies, is needed to establish under what conditions such arrangements consolidate into lasting institutions and under what conditions they dissolve. Third, the comparative reach of this issue, spanning European and other global contexts, has barely been exploited: systematic comparison across governance and welfare regimes would test whether the tensions identified here are structural features of proximity-based tourism as such, or artefacts of the particular institutional settings examined so far.

A consistent range of initiatives already implemented in different contexts offers useful material for pondering potential responses to overtourism that show clear affinity with most current understanding of place-management approaches. These measures span from defining limits and thresholds, such as calculating tourism carrying capacity (Zekan *et al.*, 2022), to balancing global expectations with local resource reproduction, experimenting with visitor-flow regulation mechanisms such as Venice’s “Contributo di Accesso” (Comune di Venezia, 2026) or redistributing tourism-related dividends through community-based schemes such as Kerala’s Responsible Tourism Mission (Tourism4SDGs, 2026). Under this category also falls the regulation of tourist accommodations, as in Barcelona’s Special Urban Plan for Tourist Accommodations (Reina, 2026), which may consider restricting licenses in core heritage areas and seeking compensation mechanisms for residents.

Additional experiences relate to redistributing value and strengthening local initiative capacities, including small-town branding models such as “CittaSlow” (CittaSlow, 2024, 2026), dispersed hospitality solutions such as “albergo diffuso” (Confalonieri, 2011) combined with 1-euro house programs (Giuffrida *et al.*, 2021) to repopulate historic settlements, and community-driven heritage reframing exemplified by ecomuseums that build shared narratives rooted in local values (Corsane *et al.*, 2007; Rivière, 1985).

Behaviour-oriented interventions further complement these structural measures, ranging from awareness campaigns on appropriate dressing in mountain environments and on-trail guidance by local police to incentive-based programs such as Copenhagen’s CopenPay, which rewards environmentally conscious tourist behavior (VisitCopenhagen, 2026).

Taken together, all the mentioned practices illustrate a heterogeneous but convergent practice that considers overtourism mitigation based on integrating place-management strategies. The latter can support reflections on a shared idea of limits, redistributing benefits and fostering shared responsibility and ethics for heritage and its implications at large. All of them should be integral parts of an integrated management plan for the area or region, regardless of whether it is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization site, a protected area under a different form of protection, or an ordinary site. Such a plan could focus on the interrelated impacts of overtourism, drawing on assessment analyses (including a territorial SWOT analysis) and then planning how to control, mitigate or adapt to it. Flexible thresholds need to be defined each year jointly by local people, experts and institutional bodies, based on changing internal and external stressors (e.g. environmental and socioeconomic conditions, among others).

In conclusion, the term overtourism provides a clear and precise framing of the issue. Its proposed alternatives, this special issue suggests, therefore require the same clarity to be brought to their own internal contradictions.

Francesca Bragaglia 

*Inter-university Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST),
Politecnico di Torino, Turin, Italy*

Luca Tricarico 

*Research Institute on Sustainable Economic Growth – National Research Council of
Italy (IRCrES – CNR), Rome, Italy, and*

Fabrizio Aimar 

Department of Architecture, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

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