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Slowing-down Tourism in Heritage Cities: The Role of Independent Businesses in Achieving Just and Regenerative Futures

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ABSTRACT

The industrial neoliberal model that dominates the tourism sector is unsustainable. Exploring tourism as a living system offers a novel and slower way to appreciate the industry's future. The pandemic significantly impacted cities. However, the historic City of York, United Kingdom, made an astounding recovery and critical to this success was York's independent businesses (SMEs), on whom this research focuses. Through film ethnography, the experiences of York's independent businesses are analysed, offering insights concerning the symbiotic relationship between SMEs and human and non-human stakeholders. By analysing tourism as a living system, practice-led regenerative processes are highlighted. The study demonstrates how localism is foundational to a shared identity that drives stewardship and empowers the regeneration of heritage and city spaces. The research shows how tourism and living systems thinking provide a novel perspective on conceptualising regenerative economic growth that promotes justice in historic cities.

Introduction

The tangible and intangible structures, architecture and culture of historic cities are increasingly threatened by intense neoliberal consumption and mass "touristification" (Novy & Colomb, 2019, p. 358). Cities like Venice and Barcelona, which are subject to unsustainable and extractive business models, suffer from the adverse effects of overtourism. This phenomenon undermines the aspects that attract tourists – the ability to sense, feel, and experience the unique ecological and cultural differences of these cities (D'Hauteserre, 2015). As a result, the sustainability of these precious locations is threatened (Milano, 2018). Discontent among scholars and public organisations has led to the emergence of regenerative and slower approaches to tourism, which offer the potential to restore community and environmental ecologies (Pollock, 2019). The purpose is to future-proof ecosystems from global crises (Hussain & Haley, 2022) by galvanising and empowering communities to build capacity to lead change.

Despite the devastating impact of the pandemic on the heritage sector, York emerged largely unscathed. York, United Kingdom (UK), is a small, deindustrialised city with a historic centre that has become a global tourist destination (Visit York, n.d.). York, like other heritage sites, is subject to intense commodification and exploitation as a global tourist destination aimed at boosting economic growth (Milano, 2018). The city welcomed an estimated 8.9 million visitors in 2022, with 73% being from the UK, making repeat day visits. Additionally, tourism supports 17,000 jobs and contributes £1.7 million to the city's economy (Visit York, n.d.). Although York's post-pandemic recovery has been positive, exceeding its target visitor numbers in 2020 and 2021, not all stakeholders welcome this growth with a rise in reports of discontent amongst residents. Residents claim that York's economic policy is focused on tourists rather than residents, leading to an outward migration of local people (Banner, 2022). With a population of 200,000, recent research has identified the need to address the pressure of welcoming millions of visitors to the city, highlighting that a tourism policy that recognises residents' concerns is critical for locals and visitors to coexist (Qa Research, 2024).

During the pandemic, York's tourism stakeholders established a Tourism Advisory Board (TAB), primarily to address the issues arising from COVID-19. The TAB has since co-created a tourism strategy that is committed to developing a "regenerative tourism future", which is grounded in "authentic collaboration" (York Tourism Strategy, 2024). Notably, the TAB acknowledged that independent businesses (SMEs) were critical in York's recovery and regeneration (Paddison & Hall, 2023). York's Tourism Strategy recognises that the pandemic catalysed communities to become active stewards of the city's tourism, signalling a shift towards regenerative development that transcends outdated post-industrial economic renewal and regeneration policies (Paddison & Hall, 2023). For example, the pandemic accelerated the closure of major retailers in the city, which created an economic space for SMEs to colonise neglected streets (Paddison & Hall, 2022).

One key factor in the city's success is its rich and diverse heritage sector, with York Minster, the second-largest European Gothic cathedral, at its focal point. Surrounding the Minster is a thriving independent SME sector, which has seen accelerated growth since the pandemic. The symbiotic relationship between heritage and SMEs is fostering a regenerative culture, transforming a small number of key city streets and re-balancing community needs with neoliberal economic demands. Three of these key streets are the focus of this research (see Figure 1). However, our knowledge about how practice-led regenerative processes evolve is limited, with little attention paid to how slower forms of tourism are realised. Recognising the paucity of research, Bellato et al. (2022, p. 17) have called for academics to "progress regenerative tourism knowledge" by working with communities to understand their lived experiences of actively stewarding change. This study aims to address this gap through film ethnography to show how SMEs drive neighbourhood renewal and foster sustainable communities.

This study builds upon regenerative tourism theory to examine tourism living systems (TLS) and their regenerative impact on heritage cities. The research shows that when SMEs are empowered, they actively engage in stewardship that regenerates both the physical and cultural aspects of city streets and heritage. The transformative potential of TLS thinking builds on Bellato et al.'s (2022) conceptualisation of regenerative stakeholder guild culture (discussed later), which is emerging within York's city walls. Moreover, by identifying a turn to localism, this study highlights how holistically treating tourism as a living system

Figure 1. York city map.

pinpoints the transformative processes stakeholders adopt to regenerate themselves, places and communities (Bellato et al., 2022) that create slower ways to appreciate city life.

By exploring the regenerative tourism theory through TLS, two research objectives are demonstrated: firstly, how localism underpins a shared identity that drives stewardship and empowers the regeneration of heritage and city spaces; and secondly, how TLS thinking offers regenerative and just ways to develop economic growth and tourism in historic cities.

Literature review

Slowing down tourism regeneratively

Recognised as a sub-discipline of sustainable tourism, slow tourism focuses on enjoying experiences in harmony with nature and local cultures over extended periods (Manthiou et al., 2022). This approach fosters local identity and ownership, contributing to a more just society and shares many synergies with emerging regenerative tourism theory. By identifying the issues arising from public policy, planning and development, movements such as slow and regenerative tourism offer ways to develop, plan and achieve social and environmental justice in tourist destinations (Bellato et al., 2023; Berger-Remy et al., 2020).

Despite the overwhelming evidence that tourism must build sustainable approaches to consumption (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Jamal & Camargo, 2013), limited research in the

field of slow tourism exists (Berger-Remy et al., 2020; Manthiou et al., 2022), with few studies, except for Paddison and Hall (2023), that explores how justice can be achieved through regenerative tourism development in historic cities. Although the concept of regenerative tourism is not new, understanding the development role tourism stakeholders have in contributing towards building holistic healthy tourism places is limited (Ateljevic, 2020; Dredge, 2022; Mathisen et al., 2022), and understanding the role of specific stakeholders such as small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the transformation of urban historic cities is lacking. As an emerging field, slow tourism shares many synergies with regenerative tourism but has not yet applied TLS thinking to economic growth and policymaking in tourism development for historic cities (Paddison & Hall, 2023).

Regenerative tourism development

Like slow tourism, regenerative tourism focuses on practice-led interventions driven by host communities (Pollock, 2019). Drawing on Western science and Indigenous knowledge systems, regenerative tourism presents a mature approach to designing future destinations (Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022; Mang & Reed, 2012). Regenerative tourism advocates that host communities are enabled to build the capability and capacity to work towards distributive social justice through adopting active roles as stewards (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Duxbury et al., 2020). The conceptual foundation of regenerative tourism is informed by diverse ecological perspectives, Indigenous Peoples' worldviews, knowledge systems and cultures (Matunga et al., 2020).

Although lacking a conclusive definition, Bellato et al. (2023, p. 11) conceptualise regenerative tourism as "transformational", enabling communities to thrive through restoring and developing healthy ecosystems. In contrast, to managing the impact of tourism, regenerative tourism is concerned with sustaining local, cultural, and natural patterns thus, building the capacity of whole systems to regenerate (Becken & Kaur, 2021), which resonates with conceptual framings such as post-growth and degrowth that challenge the dominant neoliberal discourse on pro-growth economics as a measure of progress (Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2024).

Indeed, regenerative tourism facilitates net-positive effects by protecting and promoting local identity, culture and sociality that counter neoliberal consumer capitalism (Hussain & Haley, 2022). This revival of holistically appreciating life as a complex living system is conceptually new in tourism (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Pollock, 2019). Regenerative tourism operationalises the principles of degrowth by enhancing ecological conditions and human well-being through the equitable distribution of global wealth, upholding ecological justice, democracy, human rights, and diversity. Degrowth is not a reductive alternative to growth, but a transformative approach to addressing planetary collapse, inequality, and global crisis resulting from mass consumption (Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2024). However, building such an alternative economy is vulnerable to neoliberal economic pressures, particularly in historic cities that suffer under the commodifying forces of "touristification" (Novy & Colomb, 2019, p. 358).

Although regenerative tourism advocates for community empowerment through active stewardship, collaboration and co-production (Hes & Du Plessis, 2014; Paddison & Hall, 2023), Dredge (2022, p. 1) argues this requires a paradigm shift that evolves from an individual mindset of "me" to a collective, place-based, community-centred

mindset of "we", founded on compassion, empathy, and collectivism. Furthermore, it is argued that practice-led regenerative approaches are crucial for community recovery and renewal in the aftermath of major catastrophes, such as pandemics (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Bellato et al. (2023, p. 17) offer a regenerative tourism conceptual framework for renewal by approaching tourism as a living system (TLS), which facilitates connections and creates reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships. The framework identifies seven common principles evident in regenerative destinations, which draw from an ecological worldview and lever TLS thinking to achieve transformation that challenges industrial models of tourism (Bellato et al., 2023).

To summarise, the principles specify that transformation is achieved by identifying unique potential, adopting healing approaches that promote cultural revival, and regenerating places and communities that produce net-positive impacts. To operationalise TLS, thinking requires practice-led approaches where communities collaborate to build capacity (Bellato et al., 2023) and regenerate city spaces (Paddison & Hall, 2023).

Operationalising regenerative tourism theory through TLS thinking

Regenerative tourism, conceptualised as a living system, involves dynamic interactions among stakeholders and places through knowledge sharing and collaboration. These processes foster resilient systems that balance and support other life forms, enhancing overall well-being (Pollock, 2019). When applied to tourism, scholars argue that TLS thinking leads to regenerative practices, in this case through business stakeholders collaborating to improve market conditions by sharing knowledge and resources (Bellato et al., 2022).

TLS signals a paradigm shift, whereby stakeholders evolve from neoliberal extraction to one that is regenerative and sustainable, thereby building healthy ecological systems. The regenerative TLS framework theorised by Bellato et al. (2022) attempts to transform theory and practice by creating deeper knowledge about the interrelationships and roles adopted by human and non-human stakeholders. Instead of stakeholders being perceived as part of the system, they are recognised as *the* living system where collaboration with the environment is central (Bellato et al., 2022).

Dominated by an industrial ideology, tourism scholarship has yet to meaningfully apply TSL thinking to destinations (Bellato et al., 2022), and none have applied the concept to historic cities (Paddison & Hall, 2022). Exploring historic cities as a living system through TLS thinking offers a novel way to analyse how cities can re-balance neoliberal economic forces. As such, this paper examines how SMEs in York are developing TLS-like characteristics and how their interactions with both intangible and tangible heritage result in transformative, regenerative outcomes. The study shows how SMEs in York are developing a new economic growth model, leading to significant changes in a key area of the city centre.

Stakeholder guilds: operationalising tourism living systems

Conceptually, regenerative tourism goes beyond addressing the ecological impact of tourism by taking a holistic approach to destination development and management (Bellato & Cheer, 2021; Duxbury et al., 2020). This requires the active participation of destination stakeholders, including the public, private, and third sectors, to steward collaboration, innovate solutions, and agree on priorities (Duxbury et al., 2020). This warrants an

inclusive culture that builds capacity within marginalised communities by adopting and recognising stakeholder roles.

Bellato et al. (2022) identified five interdependent and interconnected stakeholder roles (guesting, hosting, communing, stewarding and placing) that are vital for operationalising healthy TLS ecologies. Bellato et al. (2022, p. 319) refer to communities that adopt these key roles as "stakeholder guilds", which bring "together human and non-human stakeholders with a shared interest in growing the potential and cultivating the health of places". Four elements are foundational to stakeholder guilds arising from (1) the uniqueness of place that informs a shared identity, (2) dynamic reciprocal relationships existing between guild stakeholders, (3) evolving collaborative practices, and (4) a mutual interdependency of the system and resources (Mang & Haggard, 2016).

It should be noted that the study does not claim that SMEs in York are "Indigenous" and therefore uses the term local and localism to refer to a diverse community of business owners and origins. Moreover, the study adopted the World Economic Forum (WEF, n.d.) definition, which defines SMEs as entities characterised by ownership and structure, lacking corporate shareholders, and privately owned. SMEs make a town unique and give it a "local" feel, contributing significantly to economic growth, innovation, and sustainability globally, regionally, and locally – a factor with a heritage spanning millennia.

Whilst, mediaeval craft and merchants' guilds worked, primarily to achieve economic gain, they differ profoundly from the concept of "stakeholder guilds", which originate from Indigenous knowledge and are defined by the interdependencies between human and non-human stakeholders sharing an interest in developing the potential and health of places, they do share some similarities (Bellato et al., 2022, p. 319). For example, historians have identified that Guilds had a significant and much broader social, political, cultural and religious function (Dobson & Smith, 2006).

Guilds in York have a nine-hundred-year heritage (Dobson & Smith, 2006) that established a framework for innovation, entrepreneurship, and social security. They offered support, family-like sponsorship, mutual insurance, and protection, while also promoting religious buildings and organising festivities (Lucassen et al., 2008, pp. 8–9). The economy of pre-industrial York, like that of nearly all European towns, was founded on the small-scale production of goods for personal consumption and their sale from production houses and workshops (Dobson & Smith, 2006). In York, a parallel can be drawn between the ancient guilds and a contemporary culture of establishing independent traders' associations that collaborate to achieve representation and recognition, both politically, economically, and socially (as later discussed). These guild-like associations support SMEs in upholding traditional crafts and help artisans revive local small-scale production.

By applying Bellato et al.'s (2022) framework, we elucidate how a stakeholder guild culture is emerging within York's city walls and propose an alternative economic growth model for operationalising regenerative practice-led tourism development.

Methodology

Case study context

York, founded as a Roman fort in AD 71, became a Victorian economic hub for railways and confectionery. However, following deindustrialisation in the 1980s, these sectors

declined, leading to a reliance on the service sector, particularly tourism (Meethan, 1997). As tourism flourished, the City of York Council implemented measures to promote neoliberal economic growth and manage visitor inflow. In tandem, policy measures were implemented to conserve and protect the city's historic architecture and heritage (Mordue, 2007). For example, planning restrictions prevented high-rise buildings from infringing on the Minster, unlike in other cities that experienced mass demolition during the 1960s and 1970s. The Shambles, for example, was purchased by the City of York Council to prevent its demolition in the late 1940s, and now provides small, low-cost rental spaces for SMEs. Leisure and specialist retail thrived alongside attractions like the Jorvik Viking Centre (Meethan, 1997). Today, York is a popular destination for retail, leisure, and tourism, thanks to its historic character.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are designated areas within cities where local businesses collaborate to attract investment and enhance their surroundings. The York Business Improvement District (BID) is situated within York's historic city walls and plays a key role in managing the economic growth of this iconic area, which is the primary focus of this study. As a walled city, which houses many small, historic buildings, York provides the physical conditions for a thriving SME community, with sixty-five per cent of all businesses being independent SMEs, and just over nine hundred rateable[1] (businesses whose net income exceeds £17,500, see Figure 1) SMEs in the city centre (The York BID, 2024). York City centre's business density highlights its retail heritage, being named the third-best place for independent shopping in 2022 (Gordon, 2022). A mixed economy of SMEs are located within the city walls, ranging from artisan food producers, arts and crafts, model shops, tattoo artists, haberdashers, grocers, brewers, record shops, vintage clothes designers, and stamp makers that cater to visitors' and residents' needs. With 72% of SMEs in York's Business Improvement District (BID) focusing on retail and hospitality, the historic centre of the city has been actively promoted as a global tourist destination (The York BID, 2024). Thus, tourism policy and governance have concentrated on revitalising the local economy by attracting international visitors to the York BID area.

The BID SME community are represented by numerous business networks (formal and informal) that are fiercely protective of their identity, with some streets (explored later) that are almost entirely populated by SMEs (Paddison & Hall, 2022). Many SME networks evolved during the pandemic, such as the Goodramgate Traders Association and Indie York, which boasts 256 members in the city centre, underscoring the vibrancy of this community (Indie York, n.d.).

Film ethnography

The study focused on three key streets, Goodramgate, Colliergate and The Shambles, whose geographical location is both central and houses almost exclusively SMEs. To explore independent business practices in York, an ethnographic film methodology was used to conduct participatory field research, capturing the complexity and richness of SME experiences (Henley, 2020). This approach examined business practices, beliefs, attitudes, and the relationships nurtured socially, organisationally, economically, and politically (Henley, 2020). Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), film ethnography

offered not only a methodology of conducting the research but also for representing the results (Henley, 2020).

Data collection using film aimed to capture the lived experience of economic trade in York and produce deeper insight into the research participants' businesses. This approach generated findings of a genuinely ethnographic character, particularly concerning those experiential aspects of social life that are difficult to access through text alone (Henley, 2020, p. 18). The researchers' approach to authorship and structuring the narrative was twofold. Firstly, by conducting in situ semi-structured interviews with businesses during four walkabouts and, secondly, by the researchers conducting four further filmed street walkabouts to understand the flow and rhythm of visitors to these streets at different times and days. Thus, from inception, film captured the researcher's and respondents' first-hand in situ experiences.

Methods & analysis

Geographically, the study concentrated on three York City centre streets: Goodramgate, Colliergate and The Shambles, which is one of Europe's best-preserved medieval streets and a site for trade since the fourteenth century. The streets are located within the city walls in the historic city centre (see Figure 1). They were chosen for their heritage and proximity to major historic attractions and archaeological features.

Forty businesses from three streets, comprising both tourism and non-tourism retail and services, were identified through convenience sampling and contacted prior to the researchers' field research. Seventeen SMEs participated in filmed interviews to share their experiences of post-pandemic recovery in the spring and early summer of 2023. During four walkabouts, researchers invited businesses for in-situ interviews, which lasted fifteen to forty minutes, resulting in over 400 min of footage. Pinpointing the required number of participants is not an exact science in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2009) and depends on the representativeness and richness of responses (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012). Focusing on the expert opinion of the businesses, data collection was conducted during the walkabouts until saturation was reached, and a robust case could be made (Saunders & Townsend, 2016).

Following the University's ethical processes, each participant was informed of their rights, and informed consent was secured before the film interviews proceeded. Our positionality, gained through experience in creating and running businesses, as well as working with SMEs, provided us with insider knowledge for designing and conducting filmed interviews during the walkabouts. This background, along with our academic expertise in documentary filmmaking, provided a diverse range of skills that enhanced the ethnographic film process.

Taking a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using NVivo, our analysis generated twelve codes and subcodes, which were grouped under themes (see Table 1). Themes were informed by Bellato et al.'s (2023) regenerative framework, which focuses on the distinctive and unique qualities (tangible and intangible) of tourism as a living system to identify regenerative processes and practices.

What follows is an exploration of the unique city ecology, characteristics and environment that have created conditions advantageous for the growth of SMEs in the city of York.

**Table 1.** Codes, sub-codes and themes. Authors own 2024.

Codes	Sub-codes	Themes
Characteristics of SMEs	• SMEs • Local production/crafts/artisan • Resident/visitor focus • Clustering of businesses (tangible) • Protective of identity	Distinctive – Unique Qualities Cultural Revival
Connection to Heritage	• Premises – historic architecture (tangible) • Proximity to heritage attractions (tangible) • Creating/participating/stewarding heritage through services and products (intangible) • Reappropriating heritage to create events	Distinctive – Unique Qualities Regenerating Intangible Heritage / Cultural Revival
Collaboration	• Sharing knowledge and equipment/resources • Creating events/participating • Stakeholder guilds	Living Systems/Regenerative Practices
Street Spaces	• Small service and retail spaces • Regenerating adjacent spaces, pavements, green spaces, and events	Spatial Regeneration, Regenerative Practices
Identity	• Resident focus/localism • Ancient heritage of SMEs • Heritage focus • City walls and attractions • Collaboration	Unique/Distinctive Qualities Regenerating Tangible/Intangible Street and Heritage Spaces/Places
Friendship		Living System/Regenerative Practices
Commodification	• Harry Potter effect	Overtourism
Policy	• Economic focus • Recognition • Representation	Living System/Regenerative Practices
Visitors	• Domestic • Characteristics	
Pandemic	• Opportunities • Challenges	Spatial Regeneration
Tourism management	• Representation • Recognition • Localism • Large retail	Living System/Regenerative Practices
Networking	• Trader associations • Sharing culture • Shared voice	Living System/Regenerative Practices

Findings and discussion

The analysis identified three themes that highlight regenerative tourism practices, emerging from TLS thinking that are essential for the development of SMEs including, (1) a passionate belief in localism and revival of local identity, products, services and a culture of local trade; (2) sharing local practices, knowledge and resources through networks (formal and informal); (3) deep connection to city heritage and proximity to historic architecture and attractions. These themes demonstrate how regenerative tourism is operationalised by TLS thinking and the regenerative practices employed by SMEs in York (see Figure 2). While this paper cannot fully elaborate on how film ethnography impacts data collection and analysis, it does focus on how verbal and non-verbal interactions among business owners, infrastructure, intangible heritage, culture, and the flow of visitors lead to regenerative outcomes.

Regenerative tourism and stakeholder guilds: York as a TLS

York's historic character contributes significantly to its appeal for leisure, retail, and tourism. The link between heritage, conservation, and business has fostered a thriving
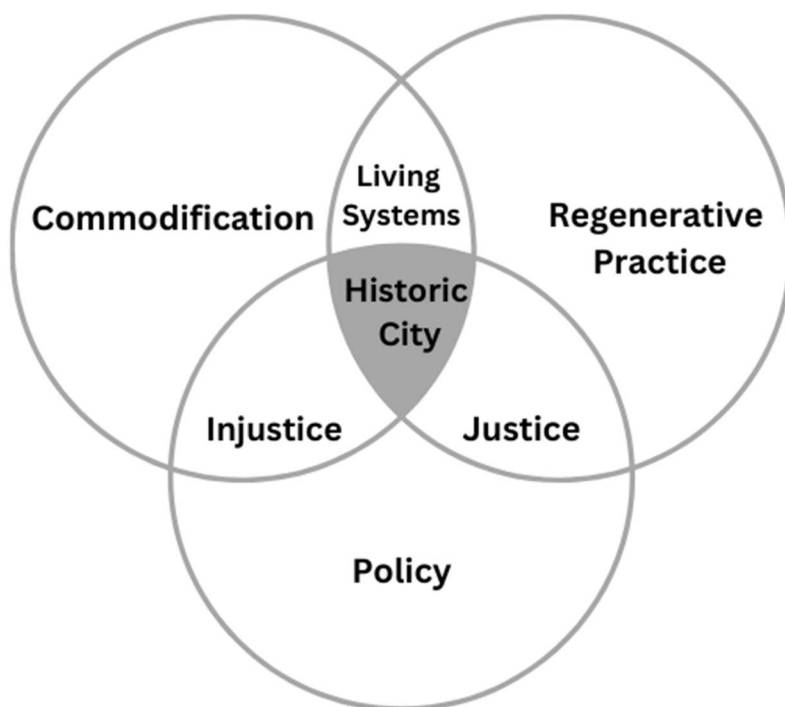
Figure 2. Theoretical framework. Authors own.

culture of independent businesses. Through film ethnography, we identified crucial inter-relationships and interconnectedness between the public authority acting as a landlord and small private property landlords, who offer lower-than-average rents on a significant proportion of small historic buildings, creating an economic system that supports small start-up businesses. As one respondent noted, "we are in a good place here, rent and rates wise" (B2) and "when we started here, the rent was low" (B8). Combined with historic conservation planning restrictions, York supports the optimal conditions for SME growth. Size is important for creating financial flexibility through affordable rents and tax breaks, as well as physical space through small rental units and planning regulations, which foster a healthier environment for businesses to thrive. One respondent expressed they "love being a business in York. I think that because we have so many small buildings, it's perfect for small businesses. It's a good place to start as an independent business" (B7). Although unplanned, this demonstrates when reciprocity exists within human and non-human systems (in this case, the availability of small, low-cost historic business rental spaces), opportunities for SMEs develop. Thus, cost and size matter in creating a finan-cially viable and physically inclusive environment for SMEs. This living system is organi-cally regenerative, providing opportunity and resources for sustaining SMEs. Fundamentally, this ad hoc environment has created an alternative economic model that demonstrates stakeholder guild characteristics, being regenerative and sensitive to local needs, while also serving visitors.

The impact of COVID-19 was uneven, and, like many cities in the UK, major retailers were severely affected, with numerous high-street chains closing. York was no exception,

with COVID-19 accelerating the decline of the city's large retail quarter in Coney Street. The reduction in competition produced some unexpected results with independent businesses rapidly moving in to fill the retail opportunities. This was not a like-for-like transition with SMEs occupying vacated spaces in Coney Street. In contrast, the reduced competition produced favourable market conditions that generated a physical and psychological spatial shift, making it viable for SMEs to occupy business units in streets with lower rentals. Occupancy in Coney Street remains low. This ad hoc spatial shift produced positive regenerative effects and the regeneration of lesser-known and frequented city streets. Our film data provided evidence of the stark contrast between thriving, living streets full of SMEs and the run-down nature of large retail areas in the city.

Although near major city centre attractions, before the pandemic, Goodramgate and Colliergate had been neglected and peripheral to city centre shopping. Now, these streets are highly desirable and thriving shopping hubs. This transition was validated by one respondent who reflected, "when we first moved in [to Goodramgate], it was a little bit different, but now it feels like a good solid street, a lot of cultural independents" (B6). Our film data captured the flow and vibrancy of these city streets in contrast to the almost ghostly large retail streets. The geographical inequalities in many UK city centres, caused by the monocultural appropriation of key city streets by large retailers, were disrupted by the pandemic. In York, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for organic regeneration, creating attractive economic conditions for new SMEs, as one respondent expressed,

> We initially were going to be an online store, but due to the pandemic, there were a lot of good opportunities in terms of retail space in York. Obviously, the high street was struggling with the closure of big stores, and there are a lot of spaces available in York and reasonably priced (B1).

Furthermore, the reduction in large global retailers disrupted the neoliberal economic system in York, creating a more locally focused environment. This spatial shift from global to local has occurred organically, creating a living system that supports new SMEs to thrive, as one respondent commented, "it feels like we're quite sheltered in York from the wider economic problems" (B7). A more just city economy is materialising, albeit in an ad hoc way, through an emergent stakeholder guild of landlords, businesses, residents and historic (low-cost) city streets collaborating regeneratively. This signals economic growth that offers an alternative to extractive neoliberal models, which balances local stakeholder needs with visitor needs.

How TLS thinking facilitates regenerative practices

Although the pandemic threatened many local businesses, it also accelerated collaborative action and self-organised solutions to create positive living systems effects. This included innovative delivery services, digital community forums and creating collaborative stakeholder trader associations. Most independent businesses, interviewed, occupying premises on each of these streets were members of at least one trader's association, including The Goodramgate Traders Association, Indie York and The Shambles Traders Association. Established during the pandemic in 2020, the Goodramgate Traders Association was "launched over the radio" and celebrated through "a Jamboree" (B2), which demonstrates the collaborative and co-creative elements of authentic practice-led

stakeholder engagement. For example, the association aims to enable "businesses to work together to benefit the community of Goodramgate and its environs" and demonstrated through their launch event and ongoing community events programme (Discover Goodramgate, 2022). As one respondent expressed, "you are stronger as a whole, and the Goodramgate Traders Association is so vital for independent businesses" (B17). The Goodramgate businesses recognise how collaboration builds capacity and capability to leverage political power and resources to support their community, as one respondent described,

> If you set up a small business, York is the place to do it because it has such a healthy tourism environment, but also, we're so well supported by all of those different bodies, such as Visit York, and Indie York. (B1)

The interdependencies between businesses, formal trader associations and public bodies such as the destination marketing organisation, the City of York Council and BID, were not only recognised but understood in the context of building a "healthy" living system within broader systems such as city politics, higher education and residents. This demonstrates the power of stakeholder guilds. Moreover, the traders' associations are fiercely protective of their local identity and actively build capacity to benefit SMEs, residents and visitors, as one respondent explained,

> We're in the Goodramgate Traders Association […]. We've done a couple of events with the pub next door, which we'd like to do again this summer. We have bands on in the backyard and involve the pub and the record shop. There's a lot of networking that goes on. (B12)

This demonstrates that a shared identity based on dynamic and reciprocal relationships enhances the capacity of diverse businesses to collaborate in creating a programme of events that benefit the community. Underused city spaces, such as a yard leading off Colliergate, are regularly reappropriated to create a new convivial social space for sharing knowledge, shopping and experiencing local culture. Film data enabled identification of how stewardship leads to the regeneration of underused (tangible) city spaces, in tandem with curating (intangible) cultural gatherings. This demonstrates how reciprocal stakeholder guild relationships build the capacity to reclaim streets physically, and socially and institute a *just* way to experience, work and live in the city. This is TLS thinking in action, which is mobilising a stakeholder guild ecology that, if harnessed, could build a more sustainable tourism future for the city.

Regeneration: respecting local knowledge, heritage and cultural identity

When local community knowledge networks are respected, this facilitates the growth of a healthy socio-ecological city system that achieves transformational regenerative development (Pollock, 2019). For example, the businesses interviewed actively produce collaborative events that regenerate the social and cultural heritage of the city by re-animating and reviving "little-known" forgotten heritages, such as historical events, personalities and myths. For example, in 2023, the Goodramgate Traders Association planned to resurrect "a little-known festival of St John, based on fire. We will have fire eaters and walkers and dress the shops up. We are going to try and make it a big event" (B2). Importantly, the businesses recognise the challenge of attracting residents and visitors to the city and perceive events as a mechanism to overcome this. By collaborating to curate new events,

businesses demonstrate how they regenerate city heritage and streets through regenerative practices, highlighting how stakeholder guilds build a living system ecology. For example, businesses have branded York as the most haunted city in Europe, famous characters such as Guy Fawkes and historical periods such as Viking and Roman history, provided ample cultural inspiration for new destination product development,

> We do things like hiding the ghosts around the city that bring more people to explore and search the streets. The dates can vary, but it's usually for about four nights, and people will look for hundreds of ghosts. I think last year about 1200 people were looking [for Ghosts hidden in the city]. We do try to team up with other businesses. It's nice to have an independent business with their own ideas and doing well. Yeah. It's unique in nature, and the reason is it's just known for its haunted history. (B10)

The practice of regenerating non-human, intangible, historic, and cultural heritage reflects how collaborative stakeholder guild practices regenerate intangible cultural heritage in tangible city streets.

In addition, catalysed by the pandemic, underused outdoor city spaces were regenerated for new and mixed-use contemporary purposes. A little-known green behind York Minster was regenerated to create a new "safe" social space during the summer of 2020, which led to spatial changes involving the public authority installing permanent seating,

> It was lovely, people were over there having picnics. This was an area of York that was relatively unknown, and then because when you could go out and meet people, we had benches, the outside seating over on the green. I mean, we were just really blessed to have that sort of space. Even now, people who are regulars to York or locals said they just didn't come here before, and now they do. So, we have a whole new roster of customers that come by to a place like this, of small independent cafes, having regulars makes the job fun. (B14)

The pandemic led to the relaxation of public policy in York, which included the licensing of outdoor seating, enabling SMEs to regenerate underused city spaces. This transformation redefined the use of street spaces, such as The Green, and broadened their accessibility, showcasing a powerful impact on the social mobility of local communities within the city. The processes of cultural regeneration meant that The Green has become affectionately known as "Cupcake Corner". In addition, the three cafes adjacent to this new social space appreciate the symbiotic nature of their proximity to a significant historic attraction – York Minster. As one respondent commented, "we are in a tourist hotspot and we're very lucky being in the shadow of the Minister … We're in a row of coffee shops and we are known as Cupcake Corner" (B15). These businesses understood the importance of developing The Green as a social destination. They collaborated with other partners, such as the public authority, to produce events, as one respondent acknowledged, "an important thing is to recognise what works in certain spaces" (B17) (Figure 3).

The distributive benefits of collaboratively regenerating underutilised city spaces are illustrative of TLS thinking, which affords economic, cultural, and social benefits for its citizens. Film data enabled the analysis of small-scale geographical changes, revealing that active stewardship had revitalised the social dynamics of this small quarter. This regeneration involved both tangible and intangible elements, with human and non-human actors collaborating to create a dynamic TLS in action.

Figure 3. Cupcake corner. Authors own.

Public policymakers in York are increasingly recognising the role of practice-led traders' associations in revitalising the city's economy while also addressing social and cultural needs. This example illustrates living systems thinking (Bellato et al., 2022), where collaborative stewardship informed by heritage drives transformation by identifying and revitalising unique, yet underutilised, city spaces. Although not explicit, this signals a neighbourhood-level regenerative mindset and demonstrates a healing approach for reshaping tourism in York through TLS thinking.

Regenerative interdependency and interconnectedness: local identity

The study highlights that identity is closely linked to heritage tourism and the historic city environment, with businesses recognising the interconnectedness of their location to historic attractions and architecture. For example, one respondent commented, "York is so beautiful, [visitors say] we love walking around York" (B6), and "that's why you come to York, it's escapism and it's magical" (B7). Through analysis of film data, this sense of identity highlighted the importance of the interconnections with non-human actors, such as historic architecture, and how businesses recognised this as a crucial factor in their business success, illustrated by one respondent that shared "that's why I sell vintage clothes in the shop in [a] sixteenth-century building" (B12) (Figure 4).

Although tourism was acknowledged as an important factor for all the businesses interviewed, it was not the primary reason for setting up an SME for most respondents. Fundamental to their identity as a business was a passionate belief in localism and a desire to provide services for residents, with many citing residents as their primary customer base. Despite the proximity to major attractions, the SMEs interviewed reported that "We aim for the local trade" (B2) and although "we get tourists because we are right by York Minster, we have such a high [number of] local customers as well" (B15). Film ethnography enabled us to capture how resident shoppers and visitors oscillated throughout

Figure 4. The shambles. Authors own.

the day, with residents visiting bakers to buy bread early in the day, and the products changing around lunchtime to accommodate city workers and visitors alike. The businesses were passionate about the needs of residents, who "want things to be independent, who want [independent products] and want to support local people [businesses]" (B13). This was evidenced by hospitality providers changing their menus to accommodate residents and visitors. Moreover, a sense of rootedness in the local community was fundamental to how they practised as businesses, which extended to knowledge sharing and supporting other SMEs.

The research identified that this unique, if somewhat ad hoc, city environment has nurtured a strong sense of identity associated with sharing business knowledge, practices and supporting the growth of formal and informal independent business networks, for example,

> It's a really good city to be independent. I think we have, what we call, early adopters, people will give new places a try and people … really … support each other. I've never [had] the attitude of someone has to lose for someone to win, it feels like everybody can win in York. So that's why you never feel like, a new street food business is a competitor to me. I'll always help them, there's something greater than the sum of the parts. It becomes a destination, which I think York is definitely a destination for independents. (B7)

Crucial to this sense of uniqueness and identity was a feeling of critical mass; the growth of SMEs meant a better city environment for SMEs, residents and tourists,

> It's great to be an independent here because there's so many of them, I think the independents may be starting to outnumber high street shops. I think if you're a tourist that uniqueness of somewhere that's just available here, it makes you more attractive [to tourists] they're having a day out, wandering, relaxing, taking more time, they want to be trying all these new shops. (B12)

Working collaboratively to achieve this was fundamental to SME practice with businesses actively supporting each other's success,

through friendships, particularly with street food [businesses], everyone gets to know each other, and I've given a lot of help to people that are starting out I sat down with [businesses] quite often giving my advice. (B7)

Business-to-business trading and support were also prevalent, for example, one respondent expressed, "since after the pandemic we have been going to new businesses with a fifteen per cent [offer] or voucher knocking on the door saying this is what we do" (B4). Businesses actively championed being an SME, creating a culture where,

Everyone is supporting each other and building this network for everyone keeping in communication as to what's going on, and I think it's a really important to have that community feeling. The independent businesses have that authenticity.

My uncle has the Cafe next door, [and] the girls next door have been there so long. They're like sort of like surrogate sisters. (B14)

Formal and informal social connections facilitate knowledge-sharing networks crucial to creating a healthy living system in the city. The study shows how active stewardship and adopting a regenerative mindset build the capacity to achieve collaborative action politically, socially, and culturally to revitalise and nurture "local natural resources and the community" (Pb1), such as the city's street spaces and heritage. This is a clear example of how TLS thinking empowers voice, and when decision-making is "owned by residents, spaces that people feel they can take charge of and develop cultural products show great potential" (Pb1). This shows a tentative shift from an extractive neoliberal industrial tourism model to one where stakeholders support each other in a stakeholder guild system. It echoes and revives a nine-hundred-year tradition of stakeholder guilds in York, and an alternative economic growth model that highlights a new way to conceptualise regenerative economic growth in the context of urban historic cities. This research shows that when economic growth is underpinned by TLS thinking, a more tolerable environment for city inhabitants is realised. In sum, Goodramgate and Colliergate, along with The Shambles, are a small but growing component critical to the city's success and signal a sustainable approach for the future of tourism in the city. An economic model that gives back more than it takes away.

Fragility of tourism living systems

The spectre of commodification can undermine highly successful practice-led regenerative initiatives and illustrates the fragile nature of such ecologies. Although not filmed in York, the global Harry Potter phenomenon has significantly impacted the economic nature of The Shambles. As one respondent expressed, "we had been here years before the Harry Potter thing started. York's got real history and it's quite mad that people are more interested in fictitious things like Harry Potter and ghosts" (B7) (Figure 5). The negative impact of Harry Potter-inspired retailers populating The Shambles has created unprecedented queues that obscure the historical appeal of the street,

The Shambles used to be an amazing place. Due to the Harry Potter effect, the visitors have changed. The Shambles is not filled with people who want to see the architecture. They don't even know it is called The Shambles, they call it some different names now. (B8)

Such commodification creates spatial changes that disadvantage some retailers over others. "The businesses around them are suffering I'm talking about people queuing

Figure 5. The shambles, ghost merchants queue. Authors own.

[outside the shops]. People are standing opposite and against my window. They're leaning breaking the glass" (B8). People walk across the street and do not see the shops that are not connected with ghosts or Harry Potter.

Film ethnography captured the crush of visitors jostling to access the global "Harry Potter" experience. This highlighted the tension between globalised retail and local SMEs, demonstrating how vulnerable local businesses are to global market forces that attract new, often unwanted visitors to streets, disrupting what was once a healthy living system. This highlights the necessity for public policy to safeguard SMEs from short-term economic changes by global retailers exploiting cheap rentals to capitalise upon the latest commercial film trend. As one respondent reflected, "York has many cultural things to offer as well, and that must be pushed a bit more. It's about the old City of York and I think this is not coming through" (B8).

There are also other challenges concerning resident mobility within the city,

> We aim for the local trade, that's our main target. The problem we have is that if you live on one side, you never ever see this side of the street. So, our aim is to get to those [local] people who don't [visit] coming down this street. (B2)

> There could be more incentives for locals [to visit] our streets. They just say, well, we don't go into the city, we go to the shopping centre. It's a real shame, locals tend to stay away at weekends. (B2)

Although the ad hoc nature of the city centre had nurtured a burgeoning community of SMEs, there was an acute sense of exclusion concerning the ability to influence public policy. Indeed, a strong feeling existed that public policy did not do enough to support SMEs' role in making York a destination for residents, visitors and tourism,

> The amount of empty [shops] big empty shops, York should be thriving. It should be thriving with independents and [there] should be that focus on the independents. It's not about big Marks and Spencer or Debenhams. (B13)

Only a few hundred metres away from the streets explored in this study, rental prices soared to a level that was not affordable for SMEs

> Rents are too high, just even a few meters around the corner. So, it's only like a few hundred meters, and then you start to pay a third or two-thirds more. [We need to] re-scale the city to provide small units. (B2)

SMEs believed independent businesses were the future, as one respondent commented, "small independents are essentially the future of the high street […] that's the future for York City centre" (B9). Film ethnography in these high-rent streets highlighted the absence of residents and SMEs compared to multinational brands, who currently occupy these city locations. We argue, this sends a clear message that public policy should focus on facilitating SME and resident participation in shaping the future of York as a destination for all stakeholders, supported by a sustainable living system.

In sum, the regeneration of city streets resulting from the pandemic's impact on large retail shows that when conditions are favourable, regenerative economic development organically occurs. The unique potential of York as a destination for SMEs is grounded in a strong local identity, where businesses are fiercely supportive of providing retail and services for residents with a heritage spanning nine hundred years. The organic growth of stakeholder guilds is evident through the collaborative practices, political leverage of business trader associations, the practices of regenerating heritage to animate underused street spaces, sharing, knowledge, friendship and resources. Significantly, the unique conditions created by favourable government taxation, regulation and policy have facilitated an alternative economic growth model in the city that demonstrates regenerative qualities. The significance of this study rests in conceptualising tourism as a living system to identify how justice is prevented or materialised through regenerative thinking and practices in historic cities. Neoliberal tourism growth policies prevail; however, this study highlights a new economic growth model that could enable policymakers to collaboratively manage tourism development sustainably.

Conclusion

Through exploring tourism living systems in the context of historic cities, this research highlights an emergent transformative potential of SMEs to alleviate economic injustice produced by tourism. This study demonstrates how emergent regenerative practices are operationalised through SMEs adopting TLS thinking by creating stakeholder guild structures. This stakeholder guild infrastructure builds capacity and capability by capitalising on social interconnections and collaborative action, which produces significant benefits economically, socially, and culturally. This is evidence of how TLS is operationalised and the benefits it creates in a historic city by regenerating streets and cultural heritage. Importantly, the research identifies an emergent economic growth model that works synergistically with stakeholder needs, which arises from a unique blend of government regulation and policy in York. Challenging economic boundaries, SMEs represent a latent commons and a model for economic regeneration that keeps the "world liveable" (Lapointe, 2025, p. 7).

Through film ethnography, we documented how the pandemic transformed urban spaces. This change led to a significant shift from large retail businesses to SMEs, which signals a tentative but significant transformation from mass consumerism towards local production and products. Identifying the TLS characteristics exhibited by SMEs

demonstrates the power of stakeholder guilds to generate an alternative economic growth model that benefits both locals and visitors. Analysing economic growth through TLS thinking highlights slower and just ways to develop historic cities operationally. In sum, the study underscores a new way to understand regenerative tourism in action and to critically analyse neoliberal economic tourism models in historic cities.

However, the study shows that practice-led regenerative development is fragile when not recognised as a central goal of sustainable tourism policymaking. Supporting city stakeholders by empowering them through economic and tourism policies can provide a transformative approach to address the economic injustices associated with neoliberal growth. This empowerment can help achieve democratic processes that uphold the rights and authority of local people to make decisions concerning economic growth, cultural heritage and meeting community stakeholder needs. At the same time, it can promote economic efficiency that balances the negative impacts of tourism with greater distributive benefits that support local communities.

This study has its limitations. Primarily, the focus on a single case study restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future research employing a comparative case study approach could enhance the transferability of the results. Additionally, the small sample size poses limitations on generalisability. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that interviews were conducted with respondents offering diverse and unique perspectives, thereby providing rich insight into the issues under examination.

Note

1. The City of York has 9151 SMES (Economic Patterns and Business Growth in York: A Comprehensive Report, 2024).

Author contributions

CRediT: **Jenny Hall:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Brendan Paddison:** Investigation, Writing – review & editing; **Dan Crawforth:** Investigation.

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