

The last thing my city needs is Woody Allen selling us to the world

San Sebastián is already under strain from overtourism. With Allen shooting a film here, the city could become a victim of its success. Mikel Agirre-Maskariano, Wed 4 Sep 2019, theguardian.com

5 Summertime in San Sebastián rekindled the annual debate about the strains created by excessive tourism. This year, though, residents of the Basque provincial capital have also had to put up with our city being turned into the latest Woody Allen film set. The movie, Rifkin's Festival, is about a couple who fall in love while in town for the San Sebastián film festival, drawing on the annual event (this year's begins on 20 September) as the backdrop to a
10 romantic comedy.

At a time when Allen is being shunned by many people in film, the veteran director has seemingly found a reliable ally in his Spanish partner Mediapro. The company is handling the co-production and distribution of Rifkin's Festival, just as it did with Allen's previous movie endeavours *Midnight in Paris* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, among others. Whatever the
15 legitimacy of the #MeToo movement's calls for an Allen artistic boycott, the impact his film could have on the urban fabric of the city is currently of greater concern to many of us in San Sebastián, a city which has been undergoing a metamorphosis since hosting the European capital of culture in 2016.

Allen's relationship with the city goes back to 2004 when he premiered *Melinda & Melinda* at
20 the city's film festival. Allen was back in 2008 for the screening of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, which then became an inspiration for local and regional powers keen to promote the city and region.

So delighted was the council about Rifkin's Festival that it threw an official reception at city hall to welcome the director on the eve of shooting. At a press conference beforehand Allen
25 was enthusiastic about gracing the city, saying: "I'd like to convey to the world my view of San Sebastián the way I conveyed my view of Paris or New York to people."

It is worth paying attention to these words since they epitomise the nature of the transaction here. The film – at least as far as the city fathers are concerned – isn't just a touch of
30 Hollywood glamour, it is a perfect means to get the city more deeply embedded on the global tourist map. Allen's film represents a two-hour advertising slot to spur the arrival of further visitors and investors. My fear is that this film will show an image of San Sebastián via a series of clichés that are easily recognisable by a global audience, but which are completely detached from the local reality.

The movie aligns with a branding strategy that seeks to turn San Sebastián into an attractive
35 location for large-scale film and audiovisual projects. The Spanish public deserve more transparency than they are currently getting about the tax burden this implies. At the very least it looks sensible to ask for more information about the role of public funding in such vast productions.

My concern is about something else too, though: how the film is being used as a narrative
40 weapon to promote San Sebastián's enviable landscape, vibrant atmosphere and outstanding

gastronomy, all of which will lure other big international events – film, jazz, food etc – which in turn keep fuelling the tourism juggernaut.

45 Tourism already musters the biggest share of local GDP and the tourist monoculture is prioritised under the guise of creating jobs and wealth; the red carpet rolled out to welcome any business connected to it. Yet, as the philosopher Marina Garcés points out, tourism is an extractive industry, commodifying common resources – neighbourhoods, squares and streets – and turning them into assets for private exploitation, while often dispossessing the people who give these spaces meaning by living in them. Entire neighbourhoods gentrify in order to host either the tourists or wealthier inhabitants.

50 Far from generating the expected prosperity, tourism may actually intensify what we call socio-spatial injustice. The marketing strategy being implemented in San Sebastián risks creating a vicious cycle of overtourism and downturn. The more it does to boost tourist numbers, the more overtourism threatens the authenticity of the space and thus downgrades the tourist experience. If the influx continues growing at the current pace, San Sebastián will
55 be doomed to join a long list of destinations that are victims of their own success, such as Venice or Barcelona.

Local people are increasingly showing their dissatisfaction at increased rents and the expansion of the vacation rental market over regular housing. Ordinary shops are being replaced by handicrafts and souvenir stores, fancy bars and the like. The old town is the
60 epicentre of tourist activity in San Sebastián, so anyone who lives near it is basically living in a theme park with the all the crowds, pollution and noise that brings.

Protests against mass tourism first erupted during the summer of 2017 and the movement keeps growing. These spontaneous demonstrations by people claiming the right to inhabit the city have helped broaden social awareness of the issue. This has in turn spurred the authorities
65 to take action, with, for example, a tourist tax proposal, implicitly accepting that overtourism is a real problem for the city.

But San Sebastián is far from being an isolated case in risking economic depletion from mass tourism. Along with Venice, Barcelona, Lisbon, Palma de Mallorca and many other southern European cities, San Sebastián is now part of a network fighting for a more sustainable model
70 of tourism and ultimately working for a perhaps surprising common goal: the opposite of growth.

• Mikel Agirre-Maskariano is a geographer and member of Bizilagunekin, which advocates for an alternative approach to tourism